Margy Burn, ‘Overwhelmed by the archive? Considering the biographies of Germaine Greer’


Christine Wallace, Germaine Greer: Untamed Shrew (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1999), 333 pp., HB $62.67, ISBN 9780571199341

Germaine Greer is one of the few living Australians to have been the subject of two biographies, the first, by Christine Wallace, published in 1997 and the 2018 volume by Elizabeth Kleinhenz. Wallace took time out of working as a journalist to research and write her biography. After publishing a biography of historian Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Kleinhenz was inspired to turn to another source in the University of Melbourne Archives, the newly acquired archive of Germaine Greer. For her landmark biography, Wallace interviewed many people who knew Greer, including her mother Peggy, and also the friends, lovers and other feminists willing to speak to her. Wallace read all she could locate that Greer had written or was written about her; in the pre-internet days aided by her access to newspaper clippings libraries. She also searched for traces of Greer in archives including at Sydney and Melbourne universities and the Star of the Sea convent. Kleinhenz acknowledges her debt to Wallace, whom she quotes extensively. She revisits many of the same secondary sources and interviews some friends and acquaintances, including students and teachers from Greer’s school. For more than a year Kleinhenz ‘delved into’ the Greer archive at the University of Melbourne.

My interest in the Kleinhenz biography was aroused by what the archive might reveal about Greer. One reason for this curiosity was my involvement in unsuccessful attempts to acquire the archive for two libraries: the State Library of New South Wales in 1997 and later the National Library of Australia. In a further disclosure, after reading her book, I had approached Wallace about acquiring her research papers for the State Library once it became apparent that Greer had lost interest in selling her archive to it. Greer twice visited the National Library to discuss acquisition of her archive. I met with her agent in London and visited her Essex home to see it. The National Library made an offer for the purchase of the archive in April 2013. In October 2013 the University of Melbourne announced its purchase of the archive. Kleinhenz later contacted me to ask if I was willing to discuss my dealings with Greer concerning the acquisition of her archive, an invitation I declined.
Greer has assembled an immense archive over her working life, currently amounting to 82 metres in 487 archives boxes. Further instalments will be transferred at five-year intervals. She has long been aware of the importance of the archive. In 1994 she wrote to Wallace’s publisher indicating her disapproval of the biography project: ‘My archive, which contains thirty five years of correspondence, diaries, journals, drafts etc., and is the sole reliable source, will not be made available to Wallace or anyone else until fifty years after my death’.1

Wallace chose Greer as a subject considering her to be one of the Australians who had made a significant impact on the world, having more concrete political influence than any Australian except Rupert Murdoch (CW, p. 204). Greer, she wrote, ‘was a familiar figure early on in my psychic landscape’ (CW, p. x). Like many other women of her time, Kleinhenz considers her life to have been changed by Greer. She said at an ANU literary event on 30 October 2018, where she was interviewed by Christine Wallace, that when she read The Female Eunuch in 1971 she was newly married, a secondary school English teacher and ‘all I wanted to do was get out of that school, have a baby and settle down somewhere in the suburbs … gradually it started to dawn … this isn’t quite the way I wanted it, and then I read the book and I thought … I’ve got to do something about this’.2 She resumed her teaching career and bought a car.

Both biographies are unauthorised. Greer’s reply to Wallace’s approach seeking to interview her for the biography was unequivocal:

I think you should know that I deeply disapprove of literary biography. I positively contemn [sic] the concoction of the accounts of lives of writers still living, which tramples roughshod all over them and anyone who has had the misfortune to be associated with them. The kind of exercise you propose is the purest parasitism.3

Kleinhenz wrote of the reply to her letter to inform Greer of her plans, ‘she responded coldly—rudely actually’ (EK, p. 1). Greer actively discouraged her friends and family from speaking with Wallace. As Wallace arrived in the United Kingdom hoping to interview contacts, and Greer herself, Greer used her Guardian column of 31 October 1994 to knobble the project. ‘Those who wrote about the lives of living people, she opined, were akin to malign, flesh-eating bacteria that fed off living organisms and caused them “toxic shock, paralysis and death”. Other, probably libellous, epithets for Wallace included “dung beetle”, “amoeba” and “brain-dead hack”’ (EK, p. 283).

1 Fax to Managing Editor, Pan Macmillan, 4 November 1994, MLMSS 8355, Box 1, Folder 3, Christine Wallace research papers relating to biography of Germaine Greer, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.
3 Germaine Greer to Christine Wallace, 21 January 1994, in MLMSS 8355, Box 1, Folder 3.
Both biographies take a broadly chronological approach and cover the same significant events. Both discuss Greer’s books, her journalism and her activities as a publisher of women’s writing through her imprint, Stump Cross Books. Both examine Greer’s relationships: with friends and acquaintances, her husband Paul du Feu, lovers and members of her family. Both touch on personal subjects, such as Greer’s relationship with her mother, childlessness, and her changing attitude to sex as she aged. Wallace set out to examine Greer’s impact in the three decades since she became a household name, to review and evaluate her principal works. Her book is not a conventional biography, she wrote, but ‘rather focuses on why she was so different from other second-wave feminists … It concentrates on the formative experiences and intellectual influences which made the woman, and her contribution, so distinctive’ (CW, p. x). Kleinhenz’s motivation was to consider Greer’s contribution to second-wave feminism based on ‘personal impressions about a movement from which I and my contemporaries benefitted … and to find out who she was—really’ (EK, pp. 9–10).

The two books cover much similar territory, with Kleinhenz’s account generally narrative in style, however, and Wallace’s more analytical. Of Greer’s commission from *Harper’s Magazine* to cover the 1972 Democratic National Convention, for instance, Kleinhenz simply notes that Greer supported the Kennedys, helping Sargent Shriver, who was married to Eunice Kennedy, to gain the vice-presidential nomination. Wallace reports Greer’s dismissiveness of the first visible feminist electoral presence, the newly formed National Women’s Political Caucus: ‘Womanlike, they did not want to get tough with their man, and so, womanlike, they got screwed’ and Gloria Steinem’s remarks to Wallace that the article was hurtful and depressing and, ‘if I had gone to another country I wouldn’t have felt free to judge with that certainty what was going on in this other country’ (CW, pp. 202–03).

The recounting of Greer’s experience of rape is another example of the depth of Wallace’s analysis. At a party during her third year at university, Kleinhenz writes that Greer was pestered to go outside by her assailant, who bashed and raped her in his car. On her return to the party the other boys were too drunk to realise what had happened and no one would take her home (EK, pp. 55–56). Wallace describes the incident but also reports Greer’s multiple accounts of it. Quoting a lengthy 1984 interview with Clyde Packer, a source also read by Kleinhenz, when Greer said, ‘I had lots of adventures then got raped and beaten up. I had affairs’, Wallace comments: ‘to speak of rape in the same breath as adventures and affairs suggests a striking lack of feminist consciousness’ (CW, p. 43). Greer described her attacker as a former Xavier College student, a rugby player. Wallace notes Greer returned to the subject in a 1995 *Guardian* column, writing that in this later account, the unresponsiveness of the other men at the party was explained by Greer as being due to upper-class male solidarity. Wallace then details a response to the article from an undergraduate who had been at the party and considered
himself a friend of Greer’s (CW, pp. 287–91). This man told Wallace the rapist was a high school dropout, not from Xavier; an AFL player and used-car salesman who gave students lifts to parties. The man had a bad reputation, but Germaine insisted on being introduced to him. When the friend found Greer sobbing, he wanted to call the police, to give supporting evidence; an offer she refused. Other partygoers confronted the attacker. Greer’s representation caused the man to speak about her apparent rewriting of history. ‘It just isn’t bloody true’, Wallace reported he told her. She quoted Greer’s 1972 Playboy interview, long before either the Packer interview or Guardian column were published: ‘My men friends were more bitter than I was’, she said, ‘lending credence to her friend’s recollection of events’ (CW, p. 290). The writing about this episode demonstrates the strength of Wallace’s biography: sophisticated analysis following a forensic examination of all the sources available to her, including probing interviews undertaken with people from Greer’s past life.

So what advantage did Kleinhenz gain from the archive? The archive documents six decades of Greer’s life and work and, at 487 boxes, is a very large personal archive. In the National Library, only the papers of Robert Menzies are more extensive, at 639 boxes; Manning Clark comes in at 199 boxes. There are 33 series in the Greer archive including General Correspondence, Early Years, Major Works, Print Journalism, Ephemeral Publications, Publications By, With Contributions By, Or About Greer, to name just a few. There are many photographs and rich audiovisual content, much of which Greer has gone to some effort to acquire from broadcasters; there are also audio diaries recorded as she drove or walked her dogs. It has been widely reported, including by Kleinhenz, that Melbourne University purchased the archive from Greer for $3 million, but this is incorrect (EK, p. 7). That sum represents the cost of acquiring, transporting, cataloguing, curating and digitising the archive, as well as the purchase price paid to Greer (likely to have been in excess of $1 million). Most of the funds would have been applied to the two-year collection management exercise undertaken by a dedicated team of staff. Thanks to the donors who contributed funding to acquire and manage the archive, the university was able to dedicate unprecedented resources to individually describing each item in the archive, including applying multiple subject headings to support keyword searching and to improve discoverability. Up to 10 people worked on the archive for varying periods of time between March 2016 and March 2018. Access to the archive was closed for 16 months during the first phase of the work, when the major series were processed; the archive re-opening in March 2017. A second phase of collection management activity extended to March 2018.

To give an (admittedly extreme) example, two students worked part time for several months to catalogue each of the 551 double-sided index cards relating to Greer’s research for *The Female Eunuch*, matching the published text to references on the cards.\(^5\) The massive General Correspondence series occupies 120 boxes (an estimated 40,000 letters, which Greer filed alphabetically in one sequence). Each letter has been listed by correspondent and subject headings assigned to indicate the content: the listing for the General Correspondence series is 372 pages. All the finding aids created by the project team have been published online, providing keyword search access to the content of the archive. Team members also wrote articles and published blogs revealing their discoveries as they worked on the archive.

The reopening of the archive was celebrated on International Women’s Day, 8 March 2017, at a sold-out event featuring Germaine Greer and the archives team. Elizabeth Kleinhenz began to use the archive in 2015. While access was closed, from December that year, she read secondary sources and conducted interviews. Kleinhenz had drafted eight of the 10 chapters in the book by February 2017, just before the archive reopened.\(^6\) Speaking at ANU about the archive ‘gems’ she included in the book, Kleinhenz singled out letters from Clive James, including his judgement, having read the proofs of *The Female Eunuch*: ‘It is without question the most important single thing yet to emerge from our generation of Australian exiles’ (EH, p. 154). A fan letter from a young teacher, Helen Garner, is also highlighted; as is Greer’s touching 1980 reply to a French girl seeking advice about sex and leaving home (EH, p. 241). Kleinhenz makes good use of correspondence with Greer’s agent, lawyer, accountant and the commissioner of taxation to reveal her sometimes straitened financial situation. Other letters shed new light on Greer’s relationships: for example, with her lover Federico Fellini, a correspondence maintained until his death; and with Bruce Ruxton, whom Greer enlisted to get RSL support to better accommodate her aged father. We learn a little more of her relationship with Lillian Roxon, a friend she treated badly, who seemed to forgive her; also of Greer’s falling out with Jim Haynes, of *Suck* magazine, and Richard Neville over his writing about her in his memoir *Hippie Hippie Shake*. The 400 letters received from viewers after Greer’s appearances on *The Dick Cavett Show* are highlighted as opening up dramatic new possibilities for research on the impact of television.\(^7\) Perhaps the most fascinating epistolary revelation concerns John Attwood, a new ‘swain’ in Tuscany. It seems clear from Kleinhenz’s citing of correspondence from Greer’s agent, lawyer, accountant and the journalist Richard Boeth that they planned to marry; the archive also contains affectionate correspondence from and to Attwood. Kleinhenz concludes

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\(^6\) Email from Elizabeth Kleinhenz to Margy Burn, 16 February 2017.

\(^7\) Rebecca J. Sheehan, ‘If We Had More Like Her We Would No Longer Be the Unheard Majority: Germaine Greer’s Reception in the United States’, *Australian Feminist Studies* 31, no. 87 (2016): 62–77.
this episode: ‘The marriage did not eventuate. John and Germaine remained friends’ but does not speculate as to why, or what happened—an opportunity Wallace would not likely have passed up (EK, pp. 242–47).

Kleinhenz’s chapter on *The Female Eunuch* rightly heralds that little has been known about its writing until the Greer archive became available. Kleinhenz quotes early material written by Greer, including a synopsis prepared for a meeting in March 1969 with her Cambridge friend, the publisher Sonny Mehta (EK, p. 139). There are fascinating inclusions from Greer’s preliminary notes and an editorial that did not appear in the eventual publication, for example her statement: ‘I have suffered a great deal at the hands of women, nuns, nurses, sexual rivals, and I had as a result, no interest in their problems at all … I had made it in a man’s world and I reaped the fruits of the rarity of the phenomenon’ (EK, p. 141). Kleinhenz also reveals an early proposed title: ‘Strumpet Voluntary’. But, again, it is striking that Kleinhenz’s outlining of the book is mostly narrative, in contrast to Wallace’s more critical analysis of ‘feminism’s smash-hit best seller’ and its literary and feminist antecedents (CW, p. 160).

If it had not been preserved in the archive, moreover, much of Greer’s journalism would be hard to find as it predates the emergence of online databases of newspaper content. Some 20 sources cited by Kleinhenz derive from Greer’s journalism, either columns available in online editions of newspapers like *The Guardian* or from another major series in the archive, the 24 boxes containing 1,268 items of Greer’s print journalism. For example, Kleinhenz writes about Greer’s Carlton loft, where she lived after leaving home, based on a 1994 *Guardian* column (EK, p. 62). She uses a 1992 article published in *The Oldie* to write about Greer’s experience of depression (EK, p. 327). Publications by Dr Rachel Buchanan, curator of the Greer archive, suggest this series was underutilised.8 Kleinhenz could have made greater use of it to write about episodes in Greer’s life that are not well known and were not covered by Wallace. A major omission in Kleinhenz’s account, for instance, appears to be Greer’s visits to Ethiopia, which Buchanan describes as being the most significant collection of journalism records in the archive.9 Greer went to Ethiopia for *The Daily Mail* in 1984, with further visits for *The Observer* and a Channel 4 TV documentary in 1985. She travelled considerable distances with the Refugee Resettlement Commission convoys, as shown on a road map in the archive with the routes highlighted. She bought a camera (an audio diary records her trialling it and her anxiety about focus and framing); and there are 15 rolls of Greer’s negatives and proof sheets in the archive. In a presentation to the September 2017 conference of the Australian Society of Archivists, Buchanan describes Ethiopia as

being ‘threaded’ throughout the archive.\textsuperscript{10} She refers to a thick file headed ‘The true story of Ethiopia resettlement’ that documents Greer’s battle with \textit{The Observer}: her two long feature articles were not published, and Greer has retained in the archive a photocopy of the paper’s cheque for her expenses and a kill fee. Greer also included a chapter on Ethiopian resettlement in her 1986 collection of essays \textit{The Madwoman’s Underclothes}, an anthology Kleinhenz cites twice. By the time of the conference the University Archives had digitised and published a large selection of this Ethiopian material, which ‘showcases the scope and depth of the archive’, including the road map, Greer’s notebooks, the 560 photographs she took, the TV documentary and many of her subsequent articles which referred to Ethiopia. Buchanan’s text introducing the Ethiopia digitisation project refers to publications as diverse as a 1989 article for \textit{The Daily Telegraph} on sex and food and a 2009 column for \textit{The Age} about turning 70.\textsuperscript{11}

Kleinhenz was present at the 2017 event to celebrate the reopening of the Greer archive. In closing remarks Greer said, referring to her audio diaries: ‘There is for example a meditation on the Ethiopian famine which was a tremendous watershed in my life, which was actually recorded on a mortuary slab, because there was nowhere for me to sleep in the famine shelter’.\textsuperscript{12} Kleinhenz makes only three slight references to Ethiopia, however, the longest noting: ‘The time she had spent in developing countries, especially famine struck Ethiopia, had convinced her that Western urban society had lost touch with the most basic and essential human values as practised in other cultures’ (EK, p. 256). The Ethiopian photograph included in her book is taken by a press photographer, showing Greer with a group of children.

It is hard not to conclude that Kleinhenz found the extent of the Greer archive overwhelming. Indeed, she hinted as much at the ANU literary event, when she commented it was not an easy archive to work with—‘I still haven’t totally worked out how they’ve organised it’—and compared it with the eight boxes of ‘lovely letters’ in Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s archive, which were chronologically arranged.\textsuperscript{13} In her \textit{Guardian} article excoriating Wallace’s biography project, Greer wrote that the archive, ‘would take five years of genuine commitment to read’ and would not be made available to Wallace. While this claim may be exaggerated, it seems clear that the year Kleinhenz spent examining the archive was insufficient. No doubt her plans were stymied by the closure of the archive in late 2015. Rather than

\textsuperscript{13} ‘In Conversation with Elizabeth Kleinhenz’, SoundCloud.
turning to secondary sources in this time, and drafting a substantial portion of the biography, perhaps it would have been better to renegotiate the date of submitting the manuscript to her publisher.

Picking up the story where Wallace's stops, Kleinhenz's book provides some new information in the 64 pages covering the next 20 years of Greer's life. She describes Greer's spending more time in Australia and becoming closer to her siblings and their families; her search for land and eventual purchase of a run-down dairy farm at Cave Creek in the Gold Coast hinterland; the bush since regenerated and its future secured through Greer's establishment of the Friends of Gondwana Rainforest charity. Kleinhenz also touches on Greer's attitude to Indigenous issues. As well as writing about Greer's essays *Whitefella Jump Up* and *On Rage*, she reveals from correspondence in the archive that Greer regretfully declined an OBE, ‘Because my acceptance of such an award might conceivably alienate me from the aboriginal peoples I am trying to help and the Australian public whose attitudes I am trying to influence’ (EK, p. 343). And she reports more of Greer’s controversial journalism, in which Greer criticised people ranging from the Duchess of Cambridge and Mother Teresa to Steve Irwin—her column on the latter concluding ‘the animal world has finally taken its revenge’.14 Again, I found myself regretting that Kleinhenz did not mention that the archive contains the hundreds of vitriolic letters Greer received in response from Irwin’s irate fans. Kleinhenz’s closing chapter includes a lengthy account of the 2017 International Women’s Day event coincidentally held in the Kathleen Fitzpatrick theatre at Melbourne University. She quotes Greer, saying of the archive: ‘It is a big lump of hard evidence about the years when I have been on this earth’; and her advice to people who will use the archive: ‘just keep plugging on, doing what it is that you do, and just hanging on to your own rag of self-belief … Use [the archive] for whatever journey of discovery you’re on … be somebody who is earnest in your search for truth’ (EK, pp. 365–66).

Kleinhenz concludes that Greer’s contribution to second-wave feminism is significant because she challenged accepted beliefs, encouraged women to look hard within themselves and reached out and touched the lives of women everywhere. She confesses that she did not find the ‘real’ Germaine Greer in the archive: ‘the public Germaine Greer is also, pretty much, herself. There is no mask. What you see is what you get’ (EK, p. 376). She praises Greer’s capacity for work and ‘tends’ to agree with writer Fay Weldon and publisher Carmen Callil that Greer is a genius—not a conclusion I could draw from her book. On the opening page of Kleinhenz’s book she confesses that her knowledge of Greer’s personal life was sketchy when she embarked on the project. Her biography will fill out the gaps in knowledge for others in that position, point general readers to the existence of the archive and go some

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way to alerting other scholars to its rich possibilities. It may ensure the committed reader returns to a library to check out Wallace’s book. But the Greer archive awaits a more thorough mining for a richer, more nuanced biography. Greer said at the International Women’s Day event, ‘I’m told there are a number of new biographies in the pipeline’\textsuperscript{15} and whether or not others come to pass, there will be many more journal articles, books and dissertations derived from the archive. As Marilyn Lake has noted, ‘Germaine Greer’s archive is interesting and illuminating and she is to be commended for making it available to us in all its candour … [it] will no doubt form the basis of many research projects for years to come’.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15} ‘Germaine Greer Meets the Archivists’, University of Melbourne Archives.
