

Patricia Clarke review of Craig Campbell and Debra Hayes, *Jean Blackburn: Education, Feminism and Social Justice*

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Jean Blackburn was at the centre of the major reforms in education in Australia that followed the election of the Whitlam Government in 1972 with its ambitious policies aimed at raising the standard of education and advancing equality in educational resources and funding. This biography reveals how a woman, whose father was vehemently against educating girls beyond the ability to earn a basic living, could become such an important national figure, now regarded as one of the best and most influential educational thinkers Australia has produced.

Blackburn was 50 before she began to attain prominence. To that point, her life reflected the times in which she lived. She was the clever student from the unpromising background who endured a poor primary education but who took advantage of competitive exams to get to a good selective high school where, in a stimulating environment, she became politically and socially aware. She witnessed the failure of capitalism in the Depression and she entered university in the late 1930s, the first of her family to do so. She experienced widespread disillusion with international institutions in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War and the inability of democracies to forestall the rise of fascism, and she was the young person swept away by the appeal of communism. During World War II, she shared with many women the exhilarating experience of working in an important job, only to see this opportunity disappear in the postwar years when she was expected to embrace a life as housewife and mother in the deadly dullness of 1950s conformist suburbia.

She was born Jean Edna Muir in Melbourne on 14 July 1919 to parents Les and Claire (née Witt), the middle child between two widely spaced brothers. Both parents were Methodists who had received a minimal public education. Her father had left school at 13 and been apprenticed in the motor trade, but by the time Jean was born he had worked himself up to a managerial position with the international oil firm later known as Shell. By dint of extreme, never-ending frugality that was to remain a hallmark of his rule of the family, he had acquired a house in middle-class East Malvern. The intense thrift he imposed depended on the absolute power he exercised as the sole source of income and it was combined with harsh physical discipline for slight infringements by his children who grew up in a home without books or conversation of any consequence. The environment was not much different when Jean began attending Malvern East State School on Lloyd Street. It had no

library and she regarded the teachers as sadists. They were certainly sticklers for rigid rules: in Grade 2 she was strapped because she didn't maintain the correct distance between hand and eye in writing.

The seeds of rebellion, independence and defiance of authority were being nurtured in a child who later defied her father's narrow views on education by gaining admission to the selective University High School. Even then it required the support of her usually passive mother to withstand her father's arguments against wasting education on girls, the expense of the uniform, the school being on the other side of the city from the up-market home they had moved to in Hawthorn, and many other objections. Strangely, even to old age, Jean expressed only grudging gratitude towards her mother (who herself had to leave school at 12) for her decisive interventions, including later in finding the money for her to attend university.

At University High School she was among some of the brightest products of the Victorian primary education system, including politically aware children of refugee Jewish families who had fled Nazi Germany. She had some inspiring, gifted and dedicated female teachers, and she flourished in a competitive environment where open debate was encouraged. Enrolling at the University of Melbourne in economics in 1938, she was caught up in the intellectual turmoil surrounding the Spanish Civil War and the increasing menace of Nazism and fascism and found a natural home in the communist-led Melbourne University Labour Club. She was elected assistant secretary under the president and Communist Party member Dick Blackburn, a son of the then Australian Labor Party member in the federal parliament, Maurice Blackburn, and Doris, his activist mother. Soon she was selling the communist newspaper outside Flinders Street railway station and frenetically busy organising meetings and protests. Her election as president of the Labour Club led to another clash with her father and a breakaway from home, the surprise being it had not come sooner. She was president during the early part of World War II and as a Communist Party member followed party directives to withdraw support for the war until the German attack on Russia that ended nearly 2 years of Russian neutrality.

In 1942, with an honours degree in economics, Blackburn was employed in a policy role in the Department of War Organisation of Industry. Under wartime conditions, she was able to continue working after her marriage to Dick Blackburn in 1943, but her taste of independence receded quickly with the birth of their first child. In quick succession she found herself in a small expensive Melbourne flat with a difficult baby and a husband, often absent on Communist Party business, who accepted a job with the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research in Adelaide without discussing the move with her. For the next 10 years she was the quintessential housewife and mother in suburban Adelaide, gradually building a network of women friends.

Blackburn drew on her experiences in those years when she wrote about the waste of talent among women like herself who were capable of being much more than housewives but were denied opportunities to work in *Australian Wives Today* (1963), a study she undertook for the Victorian Fabian Society and which foreshadowed some of her later work. It included many policy suggestions aimed at helping housewives re-enter the workforce, including free access to higher education, childcare reform and more flexible work and shopping hours. She also made a strong case for girls to have easier access to tertiary education.

Blackburn's opportunity to work came when she won a position as English and history teacher at Presbyterian Ladies College, a private school that was prepared to employ a Communist Party member at a time when they were banned from teaching in government schools. Her party membership led to the inevitable Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) file, but the party, more often than not, humiliated women members and Blackburn was no exception. Made president of the Communist-front New Housewives Association, she found it abruptly abolished and replaced with the Union of Australian Women without being consulted. She resigned from the party in 1956, although her husband remained a lifelong member. Apart from time off for the birth of a third child in 1958, Blackburn continued as a highly regarded teacher until the mid-1960s.

Concurrently she gained a higher degree in education that led to an appointment as research secretary to an inquiry chaired by Professor Peter Karmel into South Australian education, which had reached a crisis with overcrowded schools, huge class sizes and gaping inequalities in resources between schools. Her ground-breaking research for the inquiry established that educational outcomes were related to a child's socioeconomic circumstances, which varied widely between localities and schools. Her research also led to the acceptance that to achieve equality in education government help was essential, not only for poorly resourced public schools but also for Catholic parochial schools, thus raising the issue of state aid to religious schools that had been a divisive issue since colonial times. This was the beginning of her working relationship with Karmel that was to carry through to her national role.

As soon as Labor won election in 1972, the Whitlam Government began implementing its policy to establish an Australian Schools Commission to assess the needs of students in all schools and make recommendations for funding based on need. It began by appointing an interim committee, under Karmel with Blackburn as deputy, which had the task of setting guidelines. When the commission was formally established, they continued in these positions. Blackburn was required to move to Canberra where she was immediately involved in constant, intense work from early in the morning until late at night with only brief, rushed trips home to Adelaide each second weekend.

She brought to her work her accumulated life experiences ranging from her own schooling in Victoria, her children's experiences in the South Australian public system and her own teaching at a prestigious private school, to the loss of employment opportunities after a brief spell in an important wartime job, her experience in negotiating the control exercised by the Communist Party and in adapting and making friends as a housewife in a city where she knew no one and to the waste of talent when there were multiple factors restricting married women entering the workforce. She also brought to preparing reports an analytical mind and superior writing skills and the ability to synthesise inputs into complex issues. Her life in Canberra, although eventually rich in friendships, does not appear to have included any outlets for relaxation or humour or time for immersion in anything but work-related issues. A friend described Blackburn's work-dominated life as 'quite killing'.

During these years of relentless toil, she made her distinctive contribution to education as the architect of the Disadvantaged Schools Program, which revolutionised the resourcing and funding of public and non-government schools on a needs basis, and her report on *Girls, School and Society* (1975), which canvassed the under-achievement of girls in education and the projects and funding necessary to equalise their educational choices. Her research in these areas established her reputation as one of Australia's foremost and creative educational thinkers. David Gonski, in his reviews of government funding of schools, pointed to its enduring relevance.

Blackburn's work continued during the earlier years of the coalition government under Malcolm Fraser, but she was increasingly at odds with the government's direction and resigned in 1980. She had already seen the beginning of the changes in legislation that over the next 50 years whittled away the goal of equality in education to the point where Australian schools are noted now for their inequality in resources. After leaving the Schools Commission, Blackburn was appointed a research fellow in the Education Department at the University of Adelaide. In 1990 she was named the first chancellor of the new University of Canberra, originally established as the Canberra College of Advanced Education, but retired the following year for health reasons.

This biography is a very successful factual record of the life of Jean Blackburn as a student, a political radical, housewife and mother, her development as a feminist and her great achievements in educational policy. The historical background to every stage of her life is well documented, sometimes in rather more detail than necessary, but some aspects of her personal life that might have been pursued are left hanging. The enduring marriage between Jean and Dick Blackburn was an important element in their lives and the lives of their children, and its stability must have been reassuring when they were apart, particularly during the years when Jean

was absent in Canberra and suffering from severe stress and depressive episodes. Yet it is not examined in depth in this book and Dick Blackburn remains a figure in the background.

The great achievement of this biography by 2 highly qualified educationists, Craig Campbell and Debra Hayes, is its comprehensive coverage of the complexities behind the history and development of educational policies in Australia, the dire position these policies inflicted on students in the first half of the twentieth century, particularly in the population explosion after World War II, and the research behind the development of new policies in the 1970s and their implementation at state and federal level. The authors' research included interviews with many educational experts that will be of continuing value for historians in the field. Jean Blackburn's pivotal role is woven into the account of the development of educational policy and its flowering in the early work of the Australian Schools Commission. The publication of her biography comes at a time when Australia is ripe for another revolution in educational policy.

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