

Michelle Arrow review of **Iola Mathews, *Winning for Women: A Personal Story***

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Memoir and autobiography have played a critical role in the memorialisation of Australian second-wave feminism since the 1970s. The emphasis on personal storytelling as an activist strategy within the movement meant that autobiographical narratives have always been ‘fundamental to the formation of a politicised feminist identity’.¹ Many women joined women’s liberation consciousness-raising groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s and found that they had life experiences in common, which became the basis for a shared political outlook. In the decades since, women who joined the women’s movement have shared their own life narratives: not just in memoirs and autobiographies, but in oral history interviews, films and novels, and through the compilation of archival collections. The work of building an archive of the second wave was an extension of earlier decades of activism for, as Margaret Henderson noted in *Marking Feminist Times*, the women’s movement does not have “official” (or, at least, professionally maintained) archives, memorials, museums and group rituals’.²

Iola Mathews’s memoir *Winning for Women* is a welcome addition to the surprisingly small collection of autobiographical works by feminist activists of the second wave. These books include Anne Summers’s *Ducks on the Pond* (1999) and *Unfettered and Alive* (2018), Wendy McCarthy’s *Don’t Fence Me In* (2000), Susan Ryan’s *Catching the Waves* (1999), Zelda D’Aprano’s *Zelda* (1977) and, most recently, Merle Thornton’s *Bringing the Fight* (2020). These memoirs fall into two categories: high-profile feminists who remain in the public eye, and those who are less well known. Margaret Henderson has written extensively on the memorialisation of second-wave feminism and suggested in 2002 that second-wave feminist autobiography relied on ‘a narrative of individual success, frequently recounted by exceptional women in a complementary unproblematic linear rendering’.³ This is partly a product of the publishing marketplace: high-profile, successful feminists like Summers are more likely to gain book contracts than some of the activists who toiled to advance women’s rights in less visible, but still important, ways. Some of those activists have

1 Margaret Henderson, ‘The Tidiest Revolution: Regulative Feminist Autobiography and the De-Facement of the Australian Women’s Movement’. *Australian Literary Studies* 20, no. 3 (May 2002), 179.

2 Margaret Henderson, *Marking Feminist Times: Remembering the Longest Revolution in Australia* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), 18. Also see Alison Bartlett, Maryanne Dever and Margaret Henderson, ‘Notes Towards an Archive of Australian Feminist Activism’, *Outskirts* 17 (May 2007), www.outskirts.arts.uwa.edu.au/volumes/volume-16/bartlett.

3 Henderson, ‘Tidiest Revolution’, 181.

gone on to donate their personal papers to libraries or to compile archival collections (such as the First Ten Years of Sydney Women's Liberation archive, which tell a more episodic and collective 'autobiography' of those involved in the movement).⁴

Henderson notes that the authors of published feminist memoirs shared three interrelated motivations: to justify their political actions, to offer a history lesson to the next generation of activists, and to 'fix' the activist era of the 1970s and 1980s in textual form.⁵ She rightly points out that feminist storytelling about this era is suffused with 'anxiety and desire in relation to political memory'; as Mary Spongberg and others have noted, this was (and still is) often framed as an intergenerational conflict between mothers and their less than dutiful daughters, heirs to the world the feminists made.⁶ The tone was set by Summers's provocative 'Letter to the Next Generation', in which she addressed the 'daughters of the feminist revolution', the women born after 1968:

as you have grown, so too have women's expectations and opportunities ... There have been few periods in the past when women's prospects have expanded so dramatically in such a short time and even though they have fallen short of what we wanted, we could judge it as a good beginning.⁷

Summers's plea to young women to be better heirs and custodians of feminist memory reverberates throughout these memoirs and public discussions of second-wave activism. Having done their very best to remake the world as a place more hospitable and welcoming for women, those of the second wave wonder what the next generation of women plan to do with their freedom. How do they understand the struggles of the women who came before them?

Iola Mathews began writing *Winning for Women* from a similar place of concern. She told Australian Policy and History's Jacquelyn Baker that when she worked at the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) 'we were very aware that we were making history, and I kept records of what we were doing'.⁸ She took these files home when she left the ACTU in 1994, where they sat in her garage for more than 20 years until she thought, 'I'd better (write it all down) before I lose all my marbles ... and show young women that a lot has changed, even though sometimes they

4 State Library of New South Wales. ML MSS 9782/1-90, First Ten Years of Sydney Women's Liberation collection, ca. 1969–ca. 1980.

5 Henderson, 'Tidiest Revolution', 182.

6 Henderson, 'Tidiest Revolution', 182; Mary Spongberg, 'Mother Knows Best? Bridging Feminism's Generation Gap', *Australian Feminist Studies* 12, no. 26 (1997): 257–63.

7 Anne Summers, 'Letter to the Next Generation', *Damned Whores and God's Police* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Books, 1975; Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2016), 641.

8 Jacquelyn Baker, 'Q and A with Iola Mathews', Australian Policy and History Blog, 1 October 2019, aph.org.au/q-and-a-with-iola-mathews/.

think it hasn't'.⁹ Mathews has a great story to tell: the product of a happy middle-class childhood in Melbourne, made warm and comforting by her mother's loving care and her father's stable occupation. Her private school instilled expectations of marriage and children as her 'primary source of fulfilment' (p. 5), but she didn't immediately choose this path. She left Australia for three years in Europe, returning in 1969 and taking up a position as a cadet journalist at the *Age*, working for respected editor Graham Perkin. She eventually became the paper's education reporter.

Mathews's conversion to feminism took place when she attended what turned out to be the founding meeting of the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL), in 1972. She has no story of feminist awakening through engagement with a great feminist book: *The Second Sex* 'was long and complicated', *The Feminine Mystique* passed her by, and she was put off by the 'angry, in-your-face tone' of *The Female Eunuch* (pp. xi–xii). It was Beatrice Faust's invitation to be part of a survey of political candidates in the forthcoming federal election of 1972 that made Mathews a feminist. Throughout the book, Mathews emphasises that her feminism was of a pragmatic and problem-solving kind, focused on issues that could be ironed out by legislation. She expresses considerable impatience with the consensus decision-making of the women's liberationists who were part of WEL, noting that she 'just wanted to get on with the job' and not be embroiled in 'philosophical discussions' (p. 28). She took part in the influential survey of political candidates that was published before the 1972 election. Every candidate in every electorate was surveyed on their views on policy relating to women: female voters were encouraged to 'think WEL before you vote'.

One of those candidates, the Australian Labor Party's Race Mathews, scored a very respectable 34 out of 40 on the survey, which was just as well, because he became Iola's husband just months before the election in late 1972. Race was one of Whitlam's staffers before he stood for election in 1972. He was a widower with three children who had previously worked as a teacher and had been active in the Fabian society in the 1960s. The sections of the memoir where Iola describes their courtship and early married life evoke the excitement of being part of the broad coalition of voters who elected the first Labor Government in a generation. Yet while the Whitlam Government 'acted on practically everything in the WEL questionnaire' (p. 44), for Iola, life as a political wife in the Whitlam Government was often lonely, even radicalising. She had to leave her job at the *Age* before having her first child, parent three stepchildren, and she was often alone, as Race was either in Canberra or active in his (marginal) electorate. Nonetheless, she is aware of her privileges: they were able to afford some housekeeping help, and she was able to return to work at the *Age*, first

9 Chris Wallace, 'Iola Mathews' Gutsy Fight for Social Change and Action', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 August 2019, www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/iola-mathews-gutsy-fight-for-social-change-and-action-20190807-p52enm.html.

as a freelancer and then part time. Her rich discussions of her work as a journalist, bringing a feminist angle to coverage of a wide range of issues, is a reminder that social change was made in many sites, by radicals and reformers alike.

Mathews's work at the *Age* was curtailed by new editor Creighton Burns, who sidelined her into lifestyle writing and refused to allow her to continue to work part time. Her role was also made difficult by her husband's move to Victorian state politics, where he was elected to government in 1982. Feeling that her impartiality would be questioned, and not confident of her editor's support, she left the paper. Yet despite her interest and expertise in policy, she was unable to accept positions in the public service, because new premier John Cain would not permit her, a minister's wife, to be on the public payroll. It was difficult time for Mathews, caught between her husband's demanding job and her own desire to continue her career. In the short term, she resolved this dilemma by taking on voluntary positions on various working parties and committees. A member of a committee tasked with planning the Victorian Women's Information Service in the early 1980s, she had to try to build consensus with women across the political spectrum, ranging from conservative anti-feminist groups to women's liberation. The 'radicals', she felt, made things difficult with their insistence on 'consensus' rather than hierarchy. She says that the 'radical feminists were particularly focused on domestic violence ... that was the pointy end of feminism for them. The pointy end for me was the struggle to combine work and family' (p. 108).

Mathews found her chance to work on the 'pointy end' of feminism when Bill Kelty offered her a position at the ACTU in 1983, working with the federal government (as part of the Accord) to develop policies in areas including affirmative action, parental leave, part-time employment and working to improve the position of women in the union movement. Kelty sought to maximise the moment for reform, telling Mathews when she began that 'Labor might only be in for two or three more years ... we may never get this chance again. We must seize it with both hands' (p. 134). So begins a period of intense reform, as the ACTU sought to mainstream women's issues and enshrine a series of policy changes to enact feminist change. Mathews's detailed, thoughtful account of these policy shifts, and the work that produced them, is a welcome addition to our understandings of the Accord, feminist policy-making and the ways in which the union movement slowly became more receptive to women and their distinctive workplace needs. The book is a fond tribute to the 'clever, competent people' (p. 152) at the ACTU and within the broader labour movement; Mathews became part of a broad coalition of people working in the ACTU to advance workers' rights. Her time at the ACTU culminated with her successful presentation of the Parental Leave case to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission in 1992. She later reflected that she had loved working at the ACTU because 'you could achieve things and ... we had a common bond, because we cared about the Labor Party and [we] wanted to make things happen' (p. 250).

The ACTU did their best to make the most of the opportunities presented by the federal Labor Government; Mathews ends her book with a lengthy list of policies still to be enacted as a reminder of what still needs to be done.

For the young women born after Anne Summers's 'letter to the next generation' was published, the second wave of the women's movement can feel very remote. The generation gap between the women of the second wave, their Generation X 'daughters' and today's resurgent feminists often produces reductive readings of each group's activism. Older women complain that younger women are not activist *enough*, while millennial women tend to criticise (even caricature) the second wave's lack of intersectionality and narrow positions on questions of sexuality and gender identity. Each of these criticisms fails to take account of the very distinctive cultural and political contexts in which these activist positions were formed, and the kinds of work that was made possible. As British author Helen Lewis pointed out in her recent history of British feminism, *Difficult Women*, 'the second wave of feminism in the late 1960s and 70s is often now derided as privileged and blinkered. But it swept away the legal framework which enshrined women's second-class status'.¹⁰ Iola Mathews's memoir reminds us of the very distinctive political and social framework within which she and many other women worked to reform Australia's workplace laws, and the importance of these reforms to subsequent generations of women. She has written an invaluable record of the ways the Accord worked to advance women's rights, an important reminder that the women's movement was a struggle fought on many fronts.

10 Helen Lewis, *Difficult Women: A History of Feminism in Eleven Fights* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2020), 28.

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