

14. Women's leadership in writers' associations

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In thinking about women, leadership and literature, I have passed up the opportunity to celebrate writers like Henry Handel Richardson, Christina Stead and Judith Wright, whose creative achievements call for the discourse of heroic individualism. Rather, in accord with the feminist challenges to conventional concepts of leadership outlined by Amanda Sinclair's leading chapter in this book, I looked for women who have sought to influence public opinion about literary matters and advocate in various ways for writers. In Australia women's literary activism of this kind includes furthering the cause of Australian literature, as Miles Franklin did throughout her life, or forming writers' associations which work to ensure the political, literary and economic independence of writers. Specifically feminist literary activism involves drawing attention to the previously neglected traditions of women's writing and nurturing contemporary female writers, as feminist publishers, booksellers and academics have done since the 1970s.

In this chapter I want to draw attention to some of the women who have been active in writers' associations—the Fellowship of Australian Writers (formed in 1928), PEN Australia (formed in 1931) and the Australian Society of Authors (formed in 1963). All three organisations continue to exist today. They have both social and practical purposes: while an important result of their formation was to bring writers out of their individual isolation and into contact with one another, the major work they have undertaken to date has involved lobbying government and other bodies to further their aims of protecting the rights and enhancing the opportunities and income of writers.

Women were prominent in the formation and running of all three groups, and in some cases achieved positions of formal leadership. What was new about women's leadership in these three organisations was that they were not organising on their own behalf as women, but as writers, for writers of both sexes. In many ways the women activists in writers' organisations could be said to be working to achieve for all writers what Virginia Woolf had deemed the basic necessities for women writers to ensure their intellectual and material independence: 'a room of their own' and an adequate income (in her day, £500

¹ Flinders University.

a year).² In Australia, with its relatively small population and a publishing industry dominated by the major Anglophone economies of Britain and the United States, it has always been difficult if not impossible for writers of most kinds of literature to earn a living wage.

Nineteenth and early twentieth-century literary societies had been informal by comparison with these later organisations, and did not have any of their 'craft union' features. They had held discussion meetings and social events, and had been, by and large, gender segregated. The notorious 'Bohemians of the Bulletin', for example, met at smoking rooms and pubs, or else gentlemen's clubs. Ladies had their own literary and debating societies, and a few clubs, such as the Lyceum Club and the Feminist Club (Sydney, 1914). The 1920s saw the formation of two women's organisations with a feminist slant: the Zonta Club and the Society of Women Writers, both of which still exist today.³ Mixed literary salons, like those Rose Scott held in Sydney, increased during the interwar years, and as the twentieth century went on and there was a marked increase in the social mingling of the sexes,⁴ this was reflected in writers' organisations.

The Fellowship of Australian Writers (FAW) was established in 1928. Mary Gilmore—already the grande dame of Australian literature, though she would live for another 30 years—was one of its two founding patrons, along with Roderick Quinn. It aimed to promote the *development* of literature and theatre, and the *study* of Australian literature, and to 'render aid and assistance to Australian authors, artists and dramatists'.⁵ Prominent members included women as different from one another as bohemian Dulcie Deamer and feminist Miles Franklin. During the 1930s, when many members saw its role as defending democracy against encroaching fascism, the FAW was dominated by Flora Eldershaw, Marjorie Barnard and Frank Dalby Davidson. Eldershaw was president of the FAW in 1935 and again in 1943. The FAW had some success in lobbying for government support for literature through the Commonwealth Literature Fund (CLF), and in the postwar years its central strategy was to seek market protection for writers.⁶

PEN (originally standing for 'poets, essayists, novelists') was founded in 1921 in London by English novelist Amy Dawson Scott, to encourage intellectual

2 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1928).

3 Jane Hunt, 'Following Women: Sydney Women Writers and the Organisational Impulse', *Australian Cultural History* 23 (2004): 175–99.

4 Jill Julius Matthews, *Dance Hall and Picture Palace: Sydney's Romance with Modernity* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2005), 88–90.

5 Len Fox, *Dream at a Graveside: History of the Fellowship of Australian Writers, 1928–1988* (Sydney: FAW, 1989), 18.

6 Pat Buckridge, 'Clearing a Space for Australian Literature', in *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, eds Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Strauss (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998), 180.

cooperation among writers and with a particular brief to defend freedom of expression internationally. Ten years later, PEN Australia was established, the work of a triumvirate of women writers: Mary Gilmore (again), Ethel Turner and Dorothea Mackellar. The Melbourne PEN Club was also established, to which Vance and Nettie Palmer belonged. Its formation in 1931 suggests it was also a response to the rising tides of political censorship of the period, but there is as yet no history of this organisation in Australia.

The writers' organisations of the 1930s were formed during a time when there was a growing conviction in Australia that government should assist the evolution of a national literature, and so the FAW's central strategy was lobbying for government patronage for writers. The Commonwealth Literary Fund, formed in 1908 as a modest pension scheme for writers, was expanded in 1939, largely due to agitation by the FAW. It took on a range of activities promoting and assisting the production of Australian literature. The CLF was replaced in 1973 with the Literature Board of the Australia Council, with a budget four times larger than the old CLF, and incorporated literature into a national program of support for the arts. This came about in part as the result of pressure from the Australian Society of Authors (ASA), founded in 1963. As literary historian David Carter concludes from his account of the burgeoning of Australian writing in the 1960s and 1970s:

It is impossible to untangle the influence of the Literature Board from other developments [that made a difference to Australian literature]—the growth of new publishers, the formation of the Australian Society of Authors, the expansion of university teaching, the generational shift in terms of higher levels of education, or the arrival of cheaper offset printing which allowed new entrants into the publishing game.⁷

In this period of growth and change, the need for the ASA's work to protect and extend authors' rights was all the greater.

Major changes in the postwar publishing industry required a greater professionalisation of literary production in Australia, and this was reflected in the ASA's focus on contracts and copyright. Its concern was with writing of all kinds, not just 'literature': 'writers on astrology or astronomy, or on Baudelaire or Badminton, are equally eligible' for membership, as their early publicity flyer put it. Its principal business was with publication, payment and distribution. It offered legal and business advice to writers, and acted on behalf of the profession 'by negotiating for fair minimum terms and conditions with those who buy the

⁷ David Carter, 'Publishing Patronage and Cultural Politics', in *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature*, ed. Peter Pierce (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 377.

author's work'.⁸ It met regularly with the Australian Publishers Association on such matters. It was also concerned with law reform, especially in relation to copyright law and liberalising the law in relation to obscenity, defamation and libel. More generally, it was concerned with raising the status of the writer in society, and had contacts with equivalent associations, the Authors League of America Incorporated and the Society of Authors (London).⁹

The ASA's first campaign was to abolish the 'colonial royalty' by which British publishers paid Australian authors the full 10 per cent royalty on copies of their books sold in the United Kingdom but only half that rate for sales in Australia, which were considered 'export sales'. Some of its other early successes included negotiating with the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) for better rates of pay for scripts, with newspapers and periodicals for payment on acceptance, and with publishers for repeat fees for anthologies. It published a newsletter (which became the journal *Australian Author*) and a guide to book contracts, as well as *The Australian and New Zealand Writer's Handbook* (1975). It was involved in setting up the National Book Council, making a foundation grant for that purpose. It also made a foundation grant to finance the McNair Survey into writers' incomes in 1969, with additional support from Ampol, the Bank of New South Wales and the CLF—evidence that its fundraising activities extended into the commercial world.¹⁰ The results of this survey included five recommendations for action, beginning with a call for a public lending right—something the British Society of Authors was also seeking.¹¹

In tandem with the Publishers Association, the ASA waged a long and ultimately successful campaign for the Public Lending Right (PLR), which was agreed to in 1975 (although it was not actually established in legislation until 1985).¹² This is the government-funded scheme to compensate writers for royalty income they lose through the availability of their books in public libraries. It, and the Educational Lending Right set up in 2000, is an innovation from which writers and illustrators of all descriptions benefit. The ASA worked towards the Copyright Amendment Bill (1980), which granted authors a page-by-page fee for photocopying in educational institutions—a world first. It was also instrumental in setting up the Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) and the Australian Copyright Council. In 1989 CAL made its first distribution payments to authors of \$1 million—a sum that tripled by the next year's distribution.

8 Jill Hellyer, 'Publicity flyer', n.d., Australian Society of Authors (ASA) Papers, Barr Smith Library Special Collections, Adelaide University [hereinafter ASA Papers], folder 1.

9 'President's letter 1963 to Fellow Members', Jill Hellyer Papers, NLA MS 6814, National Library of Australia, Canberra [hereinafter Hellyer Papers], Folder 1.

10 'Chairman's letter 10 April 1969', in *ibid.*, folder 3.

11 'Survey of Earnings May–August 1969', Press release, September 1969, in *ibid.*, folder 3.

12 Barbara Jefferis, 'Public Lending Right: "Our precious child is legitimate"', *Australian Author* (July 1988): 11–12.

Such achievements as these involved the ASA taking on an educative role. As Dale Spender put it on the occasion of its thirtieth anniversary, it has led the way in teaching the community, as well as authors, about 'new ways of seeing the relationship between money, books and authors': not just politicians but also librarians and writers themselves were the ones who needed to be convinced that these new arrangements would 'extend the possibilities (and payments!) for writers, rather than reduce them'.¹³

The Australian Society of Authors, as the first real business organisation of writers, set out to establish a national structure. The FAW, on the contrary, was a decentralised series of State-based associations. This difference was an important one, and the founders of ASA were anxious to convince the older members of the FAW that it was a parallel organisation, not intended to supersede the fellowship. The FAW had, during the Cold War period, experienced major disagreements about whether it should take a political stand, and if so, how far to the left that should be. These political issues lie behind the following account of the society's formation:

It all started with the then President of the NSW Federation of Australian Writers, Walter Stone, inviting delegates from all other writers' societies to a meeting in Sydney in October 1962 to discuss the formation of a national organisation to represent professional authors. A series of meetings followed culminating in the formation of the ASA on 15 May 1963, and the acceptance of a provisional constitution on 26 June 1963.

Much of the work in those early years was done by a largely unsung group of visionaries. Chief among them was the indefatigable, Miles Franklin Award-winning author the late Dal Stivens, who became the founding President of the ASA in 1963 and who invested many hours of his productive life to making sure the organisation survived those early years.

Another of the founders, Jill Hellyer, the ASA's first Secretary, tells the story of how Frank Hardy was dispatched by a Melbourne push (headed by Judah Waten) to torpedo the first ASA meeting, and how he almost succeeded until Dymphna Cusack saved the day with the speech of her life and the passing round of somebody else's hat for donations. Frank Hardy later became an office-holder of the society.¹⁴

Women were well represented in the early years of the ASA. Among the list of new members to be approved for admission at the first AGM in July 1964 were Henrietta Drake-Brockman, Ernestine Hill, Mavis Thorpe Clark, Hesba

¹³ Dale Spender, 'Passionate Gratitude', *Australian Author Thirty Years* (Spring 1993): 36–8 at 38.

¹⁴ ASA website: www.asauthors.org.

Brinsmead, Thelma Forshaw, K. S. Prichard, Kath Walker and Dorothy Hewett.¹⁵ This is indicative of the spread of writers, both popular and more literary—and the inclusion of Prichard and Hewett indicates that the ASA was supported by members of the Communist Party of Australia, no longer suspicious, as Hardy and Waten had been, that it was out to supplant the FAW. Other women who joined in 1964 included writers Jessica Anderson, Dorothy Auchterlonie (Green), Rosemary Dobson, Elsa Chauvel, Joyce Nicholson, Aileen and Nettie Palmer, and academics Leonie Kramer and Kathleen Fitzpatrick.

The organisational structure, as well as its membership, involved many women as activists. Its first secretary, Jill Hellyer, had spent the whole year before the society's foundation, in her role as secretary of the FAW, in delicate negotiations with interstate groups and individuals. This 'resulted in my first ulcer', she later wrote. Many people anticipated endless wrangling, and she wrote to reassure them that this would not happen. She also had to hose down notorious troublemakers like Xavier Herbert. She was secretary of the ASA for its first seven years for £10 a week, operating out of her own home at Mount Colah north of Sydney: 'I worked from home, sitting on a fruit box, and my children spent their weekends folding circulars. The phone rang seven days a week.' She added: 'The ASA gave me a job when I needed one, and several of the many writers I was to meet became my friends.'¹⁶

The ASA Council (which attempted to represent all the States) included from the outset Judith Wright (Queensland) and Nancy Cato (South Australia), later joined by Katharine Susannah Prichard (Western Australia). The Management Committee—which did most of the legwork, its members taking on particular portfolios, such as copyright or contracts—included more women. Betty Roland, Joan Clarke and Grace Perry were members of the first committee, soon joined by Barbara Jefferis. Quarterly general meetings were at first held in the Feminist Club, 77 King Street, Sydney;¹⁷ perhaps this constituted a link with the earlier all-women literary societies. The Committee of Management, however, met in members' homes—Betty Roland's flat, for instance, or in Beatrice Davis's office at Angus & Robertson.

Australian Author, the society's magazine, which started up in 1968, was first edited by a woman, Barrie Ovenden. She, like Hellyer, worked from home. Later, Nancy Keesing edited it for several years. She also assembled *Transition* (1970), an anthology of literary work donated by members, which the society published and sold to raise funds, as well as to raise its public profile. Keesing left the ASA editorship in 1974 when she was appointed to the Literature Board

15 1964 *Annual Report*, in ASA Papers.

16 Jill Hellyer, 'My First Ulcer', *Australian Author Thirty Years* (Spring 1993): 22.

17 Deidre Hill, *A Writer's Rights: The Story of the Australian Society of Authors 1963–1983* (Sydney: Australia and New Zealand Book Company, 1983), 86.

of the Australia Council, which she chaired for five years, the first woman to do so. In 1971 she and Barbara Jefferis had appeared as 'star defence witnesses' in the test case obscenity trial of *Portnoy's Complaint*. 'I sometimes wonder if one reason for our selection was that we are respectable, sensible housewives', she wrote later in her memoir.¹⁸

Housewife or not, Barbara Jefferis in 1973 became the ASA's first woman president, and her leadership in the society deserves attention. In this period of growth in Australian literature, with proliferating literary magazines and publishing enterprises, increased state support for the arts and the spread of Australian literature as a subject of study in schools and universities, the leaders in these enterprises were predominantly male.¹⁹ Keesing and Jefferis were among the first women to join the ranks of the major protagonists.

Barbara Jefferis was a Sydney writer, who, by the early 1960s when she helped form the ASA, had published several well-reviewed novels. She contributed a regular column to the *Australian Women's Weekly* called 'At Home with Margaret Sydney', as well as writing reviews for the newspapers and radio plays and dramatised documentaries for the ABC. Married to the film critic John Hinde, she was very familiar with the conditions for writers in the media industries. She had started out as a journalist at the Sydney *Daily News*, having left her native Adelaide in 1939, at the age of twenty-two, for the city.²⁰ After working on various papers and magazines, she decided when her only child was born in 1944 that she could 'make writing a full-time job, one that would not interfere with bringing up her child and looking after her husband'—as the *Weekly* put it in a 1959 feature about her.²¹

This situation—having no journalist or academic salary to fall back on—was no doubt a strong motivation for her to pursue rights for writers. She and Hinde were friends and colleagues with the talented group of people who wrote for the ABC, including Ruth Park and D'Arcy Niland, Diana and Mungo MacCallum, Charmian Clift, George Johnston and Colin Simpson—although only Simpson seems to have been active in the ASA, along with Barbara. As a member of the Committee of Management, she took on the portfolio for contracts and wrote the book about them, with founding president, Dal Stevens: *Guide to Book Contracts* (1967).

During her time as ASA president (1973–76), she was able not only to welcome the establishment of the PLR but also to preside over not one but two 'victory

18 Nancy Keesing, *Riding the Elephant* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988), 207.

19 Susan Sheridan, *Nine Lives: Postwar Women Writers Making their Mark* (Brisbane: UQP, 2011), 11–12.

20 Nadia Wheatley, 'The Long Haul of Devotion to Writers and their Rights', Obituary, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 January 2004, <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/01/23/1074732602894.html>.

21 'A Best-Seller', *Australian Women's Weekly*, 25 November 1959: 29, <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

dinner' to celebrate, with Prime Minister Gough Whitlam as guest of honour—one held at the Sydney Opera House, the other at the Windsor Hotel in Melbourne. Here is what she wrote to ASA members on learning that Whitlam's Government intended to accept the Literature Board's advice and set up the Public Lending Right:

This is a triumph for the Australian Society of Authors. It is a government decision of a different quality from the decision to make generous grants available to writers. Grants are, in the best sense of the word, an act of patronage. The PLR decision is a recognition of the author's absolute right to some recompense for the public's use of his work.²²

She was an eloquent advocate. She was also good at straight talking: her 1989 survey of ASA members' experiences with Australian publishers is called *The Good, the Bad and the Greedy*. In terms of naming and shaming, publishers were not going to like being named, she wrote, 'any more, perhaps, than writers like being framed'.²³ She recalled that

Australian contracts were appalling when the ASA began ... Not many books were being published and it was hard for writers to be anything but passionately grateful to publishers who wanted to publish their work. Naturally that made it hard for them to niggle over terms and that's why the ASA was needed.²⁴

There are, of course, still writers who resist such union-style activities. Dal Stivens recalled his 'membership drives', writing to anyone who had a book published. Some refused to join: 'I suspect some were literary snobs or free-loaders', he wrote.²⁵ A pamphlet issued during Jefferis's presidency, 'How the ASA Helps Writers', ends on a rousing note: 'We need more members to provide the sinews of war.'²⁶ I like to think this was her answer to the snobs and freeloaders. 'I'm in it for the long haul', she told a younger colleague, Nadia Wheatley, when they first met at the ASA, and indeed she was. She remained an active member of the ASA Management Committee for almost 40 years, until she suffered a stroke in 2001, at which time she was rewriting the guide to book contracts. She had held the Contract Advisory Service portfolio since its inception, and the PLR portfolio from 1981 to 1989, during part of which time she represented writers' interests on the Government's PLR Committee.

Jefferis, like many professional women of her generation, did not identify as a feminist in her youth, when the term was out of fashion. But by the 1980s she

22 Hill, *A Writer's Rights*, 69.

23 Barbara Jefferis, 'Publishers Who Break their Code of Practice', *Australian Author* (July 1987).

24 Spender, 'Passionate Gratitude', 36.

25 Dal Stivens, 'The Work of the ASA', *Australian Author* 1(3) (1969): 45–6.

26 'How the Australian Society of Authors Helps Writers', April 1973, in ASA Papers, folder 3.

certainly did. She wrote a biography of three generations of talented women, *Three of a Kind* (1982), and published it with the feminist publisher McPhee Gribble. It is fitting that she should be remembered by an award named after her, drawn from a bequest by her husband, John Hinde, and administered by the ASA. The Barbara Jefferis Award is made each year for the best novel written by an Australian author that depicts women and girls in a positive way or otherwise empowers the status of women and girls in society.

Her ASA colleagues Jill Hellyer and Nancy Keesing did not go on record as regarding women as particularly disadvantaged in society. Nancy Keesing's International Women's Year speech denied that women writers were disadvantaged, though she conceded that women academics and publishers were. Using evidence from Johnston's *Annals of Australian Literature*, she argued that good and persistent writers do get published 'sooner or later'.²⁷ But when she later published a book on the slang used by Australian women and their families, she speculated about the reasons for women's slang being so poorly represented in collections of Australian idiom.²⁸ While Keesing was a prominent public figure in the literary world, Hellyer was less well known; in fact, as becomes clear from articles she wrote later about her family, she was sole supporting parent of three children, two of whom were disabled.²⁹ After a succession of publishing disappointments during the 1970s, at the suggestion of her mentor, A. D. Hope, she contacted the feminist publishing house Sisters.³⁰ In 1981, they published her *Song of the Humpbacked Whales*, one of their first single-author volumes of poetry.

In these ways the heroines of the Australian Society of Authors all participated to some extent in the assertion of women's literary presence in the early 1980s. Yet their contributions to the ASA were made on behalf of all writers, not just women. Were they, in fact, playing a traditional female role and doing the profession's housework, as well as the wifely work of organising its social life? Jane Hunt frames the activities of most Australian women's organisations in the early twentieth century as forms of 'maternal citizenship'—that is, taking on a specialised and inevitably secondary role in public life, akin to their traditional maternal role.³¹ Was the ASA yet another case of women serving as the handmaidens of literature? A woman writer friend to whom I spoke about the idea for this chapter said: 'Well of course those women never get the rewards, they just do the legwork—so surely they're an example of failed leadership?' In the course of researching their activities, I became convinced that, on the

27 Keesing, *Riding the Elephant*, 209.

28 Nancy Keesing, *Lily on the Dustbin: Slang of Australian Women and their Families* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1982).

29 Copy of article from *Contact* magazine (15 April 1980), in Hellyer Papers, folder 13.

30 'Letter ADH to JH 7 February 1980', in *ibid.*, folder 39.

31 Hunt, 'Following Women', 194.

contrary, the women leaders of the ASA were outstandingly successful in enabling worthwhile things to happen. The power they wielded was not that of a large institution with major economic interests, and they could scarcely be said to have become household names for their efforts. But they applied what pressure they could, where they could, and by persistence achieved policy changes that made a significant difference to the political, literary and economic independence of their fellow writers. In doing so, they exercised leadership in the best sense, which supports and expands human possibility.³²

These writers' organisations, especially the ASA, have achieved immense and lasting gains. Their relatively democratic structures ensured that women could and did occupy those seats of power and were recognised for their work (Jill Hellyer, Nancy Keesing and Barbara Jefferis were all made honorary life members of the ASA, for instance). The ASA was different from its predecessors to the extent that it was a professional organisation, a 'craft union' (its preferred designation). Yet it represents an unstructured and immensely varied profession, one that exercises a degree of cultural clout but has no major investment in social or economic power. Unlike more prestigious professions such as law and medicine, literature has not been for centuries an exclusively male arena. In some respects the writers' associations have more in common with community organisations than with professional bodies. This may explain why women became prominent in them many years before they began to make headway in leadership of the other professions.

At the 'Women, Leadership and Democracy' conference held in Canberra in December 2011, then Governor-General, Quentin Bryce, described in her opening speech the situation of women of her generation who were young wives and mothers in the 1960s, typically fighting off maternal guilt as they took on roles outside the family as part-time workers and community leaders. This captures very well the situation of the women who played major roles in the ASA. They were modern women of the postwar era, wives and mothers as well as professional writers. Their attitudes and values, too, bore the stamp of postwar culture: they did not identify as feminists, and their attitudes to censorship bore no traces of maternal feminism; they advocated solidarity in pursuing the Society's aims but beyond that they did not identify politically as socialists. Pragmatic, stoical, hardworking, altruistic and modest they were—but very clear about their values and the value they set upon their work.

The value of that work, and the kind of leadership it required, is well captured in Nadia Wheatley's obituary for Barbara Jefferis:

32 Sinclair, Chapter 1, in this volume.

Her work for authors has been extremely important, not just to her colleagues, but to our whole society. Copyright ... public lending right ... educational lending right ... somehow the words tend to sound worthy but dull. They do not have the emotional ring of, for example, human rights or civil rights or women's rights. Yet if a society is to have those more universal rights, a precondition is the right of authors, not just to write and publish their opinions freely, but to gain a decent living from their writing.

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