Karen Fox review of Jacqueline Kent, *Inconvenient Women: Australian Radical Writers 1900–1970*

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Jacqueline Kent's *Inconvenient Women* focuses on women writers who belonged to 'the generation in between' the suffragists of the *fin de siècle* and the second-wave feminists of the 1960s to 1970s, those whom Kent describes as 'the bright, articulate and committed women who went through two world wars, endured a massive economic depression, [and] saw the rise of fascism and communism and so many other changes' (p. ix). Some remain 'well known', while others are 'unknown now but [were] celebrated in their time' (p. x). Each, Kent asserts, 'used their power with words in support of their beliefs, and to question and change elements of the world they knew' (p. x), eschewing the more comfortable path of writing popular fiction aimed at women and instead seeking to pursue their beliefs and ideals through their work.

A past winner of the National Biography Award, Kent is an accomplished and experienced writer of biography and non-fiction. She specialises in writing on women, including the editor Beatrice Davis (*A Certain Style: Beatrice Davis, A Literary Life*), the pianist and activist Hephzibah Menuhin (*An Exacting Heart: The Story of Hephzibah Menuhin*), the former prime minister Julia Gillard (*The Making of Julia Gillard*), the suffragist Vida Goldstein (*Vida: A Woman for Our Time*), and—with Tom Roberts—the transgender pioneer April Ashley (*Bonjour Mademoiselle! April Ashley and the Pursuit of a Lovely Life*). Kent describes *Inconvenient Women*'s blending of individual lives both with each other, through the connections the subjects formed, and with 'the forces of history, politics and convention … that moulded them' (p. x) as 'joint biography' (p. xiii).

Inconvenient Women covers 70 years of Australian literary history, arranged across five unequally sized parts. The first two, 'A Questionable Paradise 1900–1930' and 'The Wages of Fear 1930–1939', cover the four decades from Federation until the beginning of World War II, and are the longest in the book. Beginning with the story of the poet and writer Mary Gilmore, and her enthusiastic participation in William Lane's New Australia movement in Paraguay, the first section traverses the winning of women's suffrage, World War I, the rise of communism and the first part of the interwar period, introducing a host of women writers along the way, many of whom reappear throughout the book. Ethel Turner, Barbara Baynton, Miles Franklin, Lesbia Keogh (Harford), Katherine Susannah Prichard, Jean Devanny, Marjorie Barnard, and Flora Eldershaw all take a turn on the stage, with different women the focus at different times.

Gilmore, Devanny, Prichard and Franklin reappear in the second part, along with others such as Eleanor Dark, Christina Stead, Dymphna Cusack, Kylie Tennant, and Nettie and Aileen Palmer. Their stories are spun through the events of the decade leading up to World War II, including the Depression, the emergence of the New Guard, the Egon Kisch affair and the Spanish Civil War. At times during the book, the focus on the radical women writers of the title slips slightly, as in the chapter dealing with Kisch, where the connection feels somewhat tenuous, the main link being that some of the featured writers supported Kisch.

Parts 3 and 4, 'Fighting a War at Home 1939–1945' and 'Cold War, Hot Blood 1945–1960', deal with the war itself, as well as the postwar fear of communism and the surveillance of a number of writers by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation. Women war correspondents make an appearance in the third part, along with familiar figures like Dark, Gilmore, Franklin, Prichard and Tennant. Ruth Park joins the cast of characters in Part 4, along with Thea Astley, Dorothy Hewett and the dramatist Oriel Gray. Throughout the book, some chapters focus more closely on a specific woman or women, while others are more thematic, with individual writers discussed within them. The men with whom these women interacted and formed relationships—from Guido Baracchi to Robert Menzies—appear throughout too, as both 'antagonists and supporters' (p. xii). Their stories are usually subordinated to those of the women, but occasionally (as in the case of Baracchi) they threaten to take up more space than might be considered ideal in a book centring the lives and work of women.

The fifth part, 'The Winds of Change, Perhaps 1960–1970', is the shortest of the book. It begins with the establishment of the Australian Society of Authors and the relaxation of censorship laws, before moving to the life and work of the Indigenous Australian poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker), along with others such as Margaret Tucker, and the changes taking place in relation to the position of Indigenous Australians in this era. The Communist Party of Australia—in which several of the writers in the book were involved—is a continuing presence in the narrative, with this section covering both Noonuccal's and others' engagement with it, and its opposition to racial discrimination.

Overall, *Inconvenient Women* is a splendid, enjoyable read, navigating a path through numerous individual lives and seven decades of the tumultuous twentieth century—plus a bit of the nineteenth—with skill and verve. An attractively presented book, it draws on and brings together the large and growing scholarship on the lives and careers of Australian women writers and activists. The book's strongest aspect is the way Kent weaves together the stories of the various writers, revealing the connections, friendships and shared literary and political commitments between them. It is a largely celebratory portrait of this group of writers, praised in the introduction as 'brave' women who shared an 'unquenchable curiosity, fearlessness and willingness to take risks' (p. xi). The absence of a conclusion or epilogue, pulling together the strands

of the lives and events that have been traversed, and offering a closing reflection on the significance of the stories told, leaves the narrative feeling a touch unresolved. Nevertheless, the book is both an entertaining journey and an illuminating one, and certainly deserving of a place on the shelves of anyone interested in women's lives, literary biography or Australian history.

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