Madeline Pentland review of Juliet Rieden, *Quentin Bryce: The Authorised Biography*

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Quentin Bryce: The Authorised Biography (2025), by Juliet Rieden outlines the life 'story' (p. xv) of the 'trailblazer, mentor teacher, [and] networker' (p. 213) Dame Quentin Bryce. Born 23 December 1942, Bryce was raised in the rural town of Ilfracombe in western Queensland. After a 'career dedicated to reform' (p. vii) for gender equality, Bryce became Australia's first woman governor-general (2008–14) before retiring from public life. The front cover foregrounds Bryce's 'bush' heritage and 'special connections with the land' (p. 38), depicting an Akubra-wearing Bryce leaning against a grazier gate in pastoral Queensland. The image is a stark departure from the typical depiction of Bryce that 'most Australians cite' (p. vii), pictured on the back cover in her signature butter yellow skirt suit.[1] In the pages between these two symbolic portraits, Rieden's *Quentin Bryce* reveals the fortitude of 'a feminist in lipstick and high heels', who stood out 'in a climate of bra-burning activism' (p. xii).

Subverting the 'raging feminist' archetype, the book captures the essence of a woman who embodied her feminism in every personal and professional opportunity. Reiden offers a life narrative that shows that the pursuit of gender equality could be achieved through Bryce's signature grace, beauty and style.[2] In true feminist form, *Quentin Bryce* blends the personal with the political through every chapter, presenting as both a detailed Strachan-Wetzel-Bryce family history and a professional biography of Bryce. This is a major undertaking by Reiden, as Bryce ascended from a promising legal academic career at the University of Queensland (1968–83) to serve in several high-profile governmental advisory and vice-regal positions, all while raising her five children—Revlyn, Michael, Chloe, Rupert and Thomas—with her husband Michael Bryce (1928–2023).

Bryce's feminism is also explored through the personal connections Bryce maintained throughout her career, including her 'close friends[hips]' with 'Indigenous elders and up-and-coming First Nations activists' (p. xiv). Bryce's personable character and profound relationships were crucial to her enduring position in Australia's diplomacy, which Reiden explores through a series of episodes in Australian political history. For example, Reiden details Bryce's experience as a member of the National

1 Yellow was arguably Quentin Bryce's signature colour during her career as the governor-general of Australia. A similar yellow jacket and purple corsage worn during the first meeting between Bryce and the first female prime minister of Australia, Julia Gillard, was donated to the Museum of Australian Democracy after their meeting in 2010. See Campbell Rhodes, 'Hands That Shook Australia', Museum of Australian Democracy, 6 June 2017.

2 In fact, Quentin Bryce's feminist values endured through the publication of *Quentin Bryce: The Authorised Biography*, as all royalties will be donated to Women's Legal Service Queensland.

Women's Advisory Council during the autocratic Joh-Bjelke Petersen government in Queensland, when she was a key champion of the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* and former Senator Susan Ryan. However, there is no partnership more significant in *Quentin Bryce* than with her husband Michael Bryce, who she married in 1964: it 'translated the rhetoric of equality' (p. 71). Michael Bryce died in 2023, and the publication is partly a heartfelt tribute to his legacy as a devoted husband, father and feminist. Michael Bryce stood down from his successful transnational architectural career to become the vice-regal consort of Australia. In Reiden's words, he 'had to relinquish it all earlier than he wanted to, but he did it with a deep sense of pride for his wife's achievements' (p. 90). In this sense, *Quentin Bryce* answers the rarely interrogated question of who supports the 'Great Women' in positions of power in Australia.[3]

As an authorised biography, *Quentin Bryce* emerges from Bryce and Reiden's longstanding professional relationship.[4] The two women met throughout Reiden's work as the royal correspondent and editor-at-large (2010–24) of the *Australian Women's Weekly*. Reiden 'join[ed] a special club as one of Quentin's "pals"' (p. 458), nurturing a professional relationship that culminated in the publication of *Quentin Bryce.* Coming together after '18 months' (p. 462) of historical research and '120 oral history interviews across two years' (p. 468) the book fits Patrick Mullins's and Kate White's category of 'quickie' journalist biography.[5] *Quentin Bryce* relies on oral testimony from Bryce, her family members, and some of her high-profile supporters, such as Anna Bligh, the former premier of Queensland, and Julia Gillard, the former prime minister of Australia. The breadth of interview subjects occasionally leaves Reiden 'hostage to [her] sources'.[6] Assumptions and family secrets cloud the Strachan family history, with limited historical investigation. Likewise, the emphasis placed—particularly by male interviewees—on Bryce's appearance borders on objectification and occasionally diminishes the significance of her professional achievements. Bryce's achievements cannot be understated: as the first woman governor-general of Australia, she blazed the trail for the current vice-regal, Sam Moyston AC, who has served in the position since 2024.

3 Blair Williams, 'Where Are All the Great Women Politicians? A Gendered Analysis of Australian Political Biographies', *Australian Journal of Biography and History* 5 (2021): 35, doi.org/10.22459/AJBH.05.2021.02.

4 Juliet Reiden and Magda Szubanski, *The Writing on the Wall* (Macmillan Publishers Australia, 2019); Aminata Conteh-Biger and Juliet Rieden, *Rising Heart* (Macmillan Publishers Australia, 2020); Juliet Rieden, *The Royals in Australia (*Macmillan Publishers Australia, 2015).

5 Kate White, 'Australian Political Biography and Biographers: Revisiting Australian Political Biography', *Australian Journal of Biography and History* 5 (2021): 1–20, doi.org/10.22459/AJBH.05.2021.01.

6 Patrick Mullins, 'Quick Books, Quick Manoeuvres: Disentangling the Dangers and Opportunities of the Quickie Political Biography', in *The Creative Manoeuvres: Making, Saying, Being Papers*, ed. S. Strange and K. Rozynski (Australasian Association of Writing Programs, 2013), 7, cited in White, 'Australian Political Biography', 11.

The limits of shared authority between researcher and subject remains a fundamental challenge for all feminist life writing. [7] Although Reiden fails to solve the ever-present challenge in this, her fourth, biography, her awareness of these limitations is apparent in her description of the 'biggest battle' in her research process—'not what to include in this biography, but what to leave out' (p. 463). Reiden's feminist approach to history-making is manifest in creative forms, such as accompanying Bryce to key sites from her family history, that were engaging to read.

Quentin Bryce captures the many dimensions of Bryce—mother, professional, public figure and feminist—a woman who has already 'achieved so much' throughout her life, yet 'in her eighties [she] is still going strong' (p. 463). She continues to embody her feminist values through a 'packed agenda' (p. 452) of philanthropic work supporting young women and the arts. Like Reiden, I believe that 'a new chapter is just beginning' (p. 463) for Dame Quentin Bryce.

7 For an overview of the complex subject–researcher relationship dynamic, see Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (State University of New York Press, 1990).

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