

The Work of Feminist History

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Doing feminism is always hard work. It takes a lot of thought and then the work of translating that thinking into action, and then reflecting on the action and so more thought. It's been part of my life now for over half a century. My main commitment to feminism these days is through the histories I research and write, and through supporting feminist historical work generally including through providing historical information and financial support for feminist documentary film.

If I think about how feminist theories and approaches influence my historical work, the first concept that leaps to mind is 'intersectionality', the awareness of the ways in which class, race, gender and sexuality constitute, influence, shape and disrupt one another. My second thought is that as feminist historians we generally do two distinct but related things. We historicise gender relations in all their complexity and fluidity, involving changing and multiple masculine and feminine identities and gendered social structures and processes and we ask, whatever topic we do, however focused on men's ideas and actions it may seem, what were the women doing and thinking?

In 2022, as the pandemic continues, I am working on several projects and each one has thrown up its own challenges in terms of intersectionality, gender relations and researching women. The first project is completing a book I have been working on with two other historians, Shino Konishi and Alex Ludewig, for several years.¹ Shino and Alex had been working for some time on a biographical history of Rottnest Island, an island off the coast of Western Australia, near Perth, and in 2017 invited me to join their project. They had chosen the people whose biographies would make up the book, people such as Vlamingh, the Dutch maritime explorer who, while searching for a lost ship visited the island in 1696, and Lady Mary Anne Broome, who as a governor's wife stayed on the island for

1 Ann Curthoys, Shino Konishi and Alexandra Ludewig, *The Lives and Legacies of a Carceral Island: A Biographical History of Wadjemup/Rottnest Island* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022).

several summers in the early 1880s and wrote about it extensively. Other figures who encountered the island included Karl Lehmann and Martin Trojan, two German civilians detained on Rottnest for a year during World War I; Herman Kuring, an Australian of German descent who was superintendent of the military establishment on the island during World War II; and Fay Sullivan, the island's first nurse who became the manager's wife and who, over several post-war decades, helped transform the island into a much-loved holiday island and tourist attraction. Shino and Alex also planned chapters on people associated with the Aboriginal prison on the island during the nineteenth century, and that's where I came in. Would I write the chapter on Henry Vincent, the brutal superintendent from 1839 to 1866? A little later, would I help write a chapter on some of the prisoners? Being thoroughly immersed in Western Australian history by this time, I was very happy to join them.

Writing about a negative figure like Henry Vincent and about the Aboriginal men who suffered under his regime has been a challenge, not only to me as a historian but also specifically as a feminist historian. I decided to look not only at Henry but also at his wife, Louisa Vincent, who acted as matron on the island, and to some extent at their children. Writing about the Aboriginal male prisoners was a different kind of challenge, so sparse and one sided is the available material, but there, too, I encountered stories involving the women in their lives and communities. We also wrote a chapter on one of the two non-Aboriginal women incarcerated on the island, Jane Green, a teenage girl who had arrived in the colony from England as a child indentured servant and who then subsequently was charged with the murder of her newborn baby, fathered by her employer.

While the Wadjemup/Rottnest Island project is now finished, and the book soon to be published by Routledge, the same cannot yet be said of the second of my three projects, the history of domestic violence in Australia. This is an Australian Research Council funded project, led by Cath Kevin along with Zora Simic and myself. We have done a lot of thinking and writing historiographical and other essays on the topic and are now in the thick of research. What a big topic this is! For historians used to emphasising historical change, we keep being struck by the similarities between now and the situation of women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (our project goes from 1850 to 2020). And yet, of course, there are social and cultural changes crucial to our understanding of domestic violence and its history. This is a quintessentially feminist

historical project, concerned as it is with intimate personal relations, women's experience, government policies, grass roots activism, the justice system and public attitudes.

There are some unexpected connections between the domestic violence project and the Wadjemup/Rottnest Island project that have been illuminating. While working on the lives of Henry and Louisa Vincent, I read Penelope Hetherington's account of Louisa's petition in 1869 for judicial separation on the grounds of cruelty and began to research it further. The man who was known for his cruelty to Aboriginal prisoners was also cruel to his wife of many years, a connection between public and private abuse that commentators often draw when discussing acts of terrorism in the present. Henry Vincent's violence was both physical and verbal, exhibiting behaviour we might now describe as coercive control. I am now investigating domestic violence in nineteenth-century Western Australia in more depth, through court records, newspapers (i.e. *blessed Trove*) and contemporary fiction.

And then there is my third project, a sole authored book on the visit to Australia and New Zealand in 1960 of African American singer, actor and activist, Paul Robeson, and his journalist wife, Eslanda Robeson. My original motivation in working on this project was to explore the connections between the Cold War experience in Australia and the rise of a politics concerned with Aboriginal rights. Embedded both in the Cold War and in an emerging Aboriginal rights movement, 1960 is an excellent year to look at these complex relationships. Furthermore, the Robesons' visit is an opportunity to write some slice history, looking closely at Australia and New Zealand for two months in 1960. I started work on it in 2008, so long ago, wrote one essay on Paul Robeson's visit and Aboriginal politics in 2010, gave several papers on Eslanda Robeson in 2011 and then had to set the project aside. I returned to it in 2017 and have been working on it during the pandemic and hope to finish it by the end of the year. This is in many ways a fun project, taking me into many pathways in cultural history, investigating music, film, theatre, television, writing and painting. As a feminist historian, I have chosen to pay Eslanda a lot of attention too, for though she was much less famous than Paul, she was an interesting figure: an anthropologist who had undertaken her doctoral research in Africa, a journalist accredited to the United Nations and Paul's manager. When she spoke to women's groups and was interviewed on radio and in the press, her comments about questions of race and gender were often incisive and insightful.

Writing history, then, of any kind, is hard work. For me, it is very enjoyable work. When the state of the world gets deeply depressing, as it so often does, I can burrow into my research and writing and just hope that somehow, some time, it will make a difference.

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