Catherine Fisher review of Kylie Andrews, *Trailblazing Women of Australian Public Broadcasting, 1945–1975*

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An exciting development for both feminist and media history is the current boom in studies of women's contributions to broadcasting. Over the past decade, a growing number of scholars have uncovered previously ignored experiences and achievements of women in the industry. They have also revealed how broadcasting contributed to achieving women's equality more broadly. Key scholarship includes the work of Kate Murphy on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Christine Ehrick on Argentina and Uruguay, and work on Australian broadcasting by Jeannine Baker, Justine Lloyd, Yves Rees and myself.[1] Kylie Andrews provides a rich addition to this growing literature with her study of four postwar women producers at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

Andrews, herself a former ABC producer, became interested in uncovering these stories after talking to a film producer who had started her career at the ABC. When asked if she was influenced by any of the female radio and television producers, the film producer admitted that she had never heard of them (p. xiii). Andrews began to dig into the history of female producers at the ABC and discovered a group of women whose contributions had been largely ignored by Australian media histories. She remedies this with *Trailblazing Women of Australian Public Broadcasting, 1945–1975*, a collective biography of four women: Kay Kinane, Catherine King, Therése Denny and Joyce Belfrage. Andrews begins the book with career snapshots of each woman, then draws out key themes across their careers in the remaining chapters. Throughout the book Andrews shows that these women strongly believed in the educative role of public broadcasting and worked to deliver content that covered important issues of the time.

1 Kate Murphy, *Behind the Wireless: A History of Early Women at the BBC* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-49173-2; Christine Ehrick, *Radio and the Gendered Soundscape: Women and Broadcasting in Argentina and Uruguay, 1930–1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139941945; Jeannine Baker, 'Woman to Woman: Australian Feminists' Embrace of Radio Broadcasting, 1930s-1950s', *Australian Feminist Studies* 32, no. 93 (2017): 292–308, doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2017.1407643; Justine Lloyd, *Intimate Geographies: Gender and Media in the Broadcast Age* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019); Yves Rees, 'Making Waves Across the Pacific: Women, Radio Broadcasting and Australian-US Relations', *Feminist Media Histories* 5, no. 3 (2019): 85–113, doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2019.5.3.85; Catherine Fisher, *Sound Citizens: Australian Women Broadcasters Claim their Voice, 1923 −1956* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2021), doi.org/10.22459/SC.2021.

Kay Kinane (1912–1998) primarily worked in educational broadcasting, where she produced hundreds of programs. She was also the first showrunner for *Woman's World,* the first women's program on ABC television. She became one of the most senior and respected producers at the ABC. Later in her career she travelled across Southeast Asia, Africa and the Middle East to advise other countries on educational broadcasting.

Catherine King (1904–2000) was the longest-serving host of an ABC radio women's session, running the Western Australian session from 1944 to 1966. A strong believer that broadcasting could be used to improve society, she used the program to make high culture and intellectual discourse accessible to her listeners. After her retirement from the ABC, she dedicated herself to the Save the Children fund, volunteering in areas of acute need across the world.

Stifled by her lack of career progression at the ABC, Therése Denny (1923–1975) left for London aged twenty-six and forged a career in radio and later television production at the BBC. Her work was often broadcast on the ABC. She returned to the ABC on a producers exchange in 1963, when she produced a television documentary on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people called *A Changing Race,* cutting edge for its time. She worked in broadcasting until her death from cancer in 1975.

Joyce Belfrage (1923–2007) made the reverse journey from the United Kingdom to Australia. When she arrived at the ABC in 1959, she was already a respected producer after many years at the BBC. During her time at the ABC, she produced segments and documentaries for television on complex social issues including alcoholism and the migrant experience. Fed up with bureaucratic roadblocks and after being demoted twice, she quit dramatically in 1963 after only four years at the ABC. She subsequently became a lecturer at Macquarie University and was later chairperson of the Friends of the ABC—a role that enabled her to contribute to public debate about broadcasting policy and to criticise the ABC's shortcomings.

After introducing us to her subjects, Andrews dedicates a chapter to examining the discrimination faced by the ABC's female employees in the mid-twentieth century. Most women employed by the ABC contended with strict gendered hierarchies that limited their career progression and marginalised their work. However, the rules could be bent for a small group of exceptional women, like Kinane, King, Denny and Belfrage. They were given a greater measure of freedom to produce the content they believed was important. Yet, as Andrews notes, they often had to fight and became adept at using tactics to get their content over the line—additional labour not required of their male counterparts, most of whom were not nearly as exceptional.

In the next chapter, Andrews reveals how her subjects were brought up by their politically and socially engaged families to be 'nation-builders, imbued with a desire to participate in social and political discourse' (p. 59). These women saw public

broadcasting as the mechanism to be the active citizens their families had taught them to be. This chapter is a particularly strong one and shows the value of a biographical approach to this topic.

In chapter 5, Andrews outlines how talent was not enough for even exceptional women to succeed at the ABC—to achieve this required the support of male colleagues and mentors. Kinane, King and Denny all became adept navigating the ABC's inner workings and securing the support of key allies. Belfrage did not succeed in doing this, which Andrews argues stymied her work and career at the ABC.

Andrews then considers how her subjects worked across both radio and television to deliver their content, and their differing experiences of each. Each one established their careers in radio and experienced the exciting yet chaotic launch of television. Having both mediums at their disposal enabled them to utilise the format that best suited the story they wanted to tell. However, not all of them believed that radio and television were equal—King's two years running the television women's session in Western Australia cemented her belief that radio was the ideal medium for her message. In this chapter Andrews also shows how Denny and Belfrage, in particular, used the press to further their messages and promote their work. In Belfrage's case, this included her acerbic criticism of the ABC following her departure.

The next two chapters highlight the central role of international travel and transnational networks in building the careers of all four women. This was a time when travel to Britain, Europe and sometimes the United States was seen as an antidote to Australia's cultural shortcomings and conservatism. This was especially so for Denny, who permanently left Australia for greater professional opportunities in Britain.

The ABC had close ties with the BBC, which was seen as superior and better resourced, and female staff were able to participate in exchanges and training programs. By returning with knowledge and skills from the BBC, Andrews writes, 'their status and value in the eyes of the ABC was subsequently magnified' (p. 148). There were also opportunities beyond the United Kingdom. King took several year-long sabbaticals over her career, which included travel to all corners of the globe, and was a founding member and a vice-president of the International Association of Women in Radio. Kinane travelled to the United States to learn about television production from American public broadcasters. Andrews writes that:

> When Kay, Catherine, Therése and Joyce became active members of the global community of public broadcasters they were endowed with an authority and respectability that nourished their professional and political agendas; doors were opened, trust was given and their confidence grew. (p. 148)

With its engaging portraits of four fascinating yet overlooked producers, *Trailblazing Women* is an important addition to the growing field of feminist media history and enriches our understanding of the ABC. The four women are powerful subjects and Andrews deftly draws out their shared experiences and key differences. Belfrage

particularly stands out for her strong will and forthright style, which hampered her ability to work the ABC system for her benefit as did Kinane, King and Denny. By including Belfrage's often frustrating career at the ABC, Andrews sharpens her argument that women needed to be able to navigate the ABC's bureaucracy and build strategic relationships with male colleagues to achieve success.

While an excellent study, *Trailblazing Women* would benefit from greater consideration of how the ABC compared with commercial stations, which often afforded women greater opportunities to broadcast, a wider audience and less bureaucracy to contend with. Andrews briefly mentions Irene Greenwood, whom she notes failed to secure King's position as the compere of the Western Australian women's session because she was seen by ABC management as too political (p. 76). Greenwood subsequently ran a women's session on Perth commercial station 6AM from 1948 to 1954, which gave her increased control over her content and expanded her audience to include working-class women, who were unlikely to listen to the patrician ABC.[2]

It is important to underscore, as Andrews does, that these women were committed to *public* broadcasting. Kinane, King, Denny and Belfrage 'saw the ABC as a powerful conduit through which they could contribute to public discourse' and help 'Australians to embrace new ways of thinking about their world' (p. 197). During this the time, the ABC remained committed to enlightening the nation, but was not popular with working-class audiences who were more likely to tune in to the more entertaining commercial stations. While King had some success in attracting listeners from rural Western Australia, the content these women produced was most likely enlightening like-minded audiences from similar social and educational backgrounds.

Of course, assessing audience reception is tricky, and it is hard to measure the impact of their content on the audience and society more broadly. Ultimately, their biggest impact may have been within the ABC itself. As Andrews makes clear, the hard work of King, Kinane, Denny and Belfrage paved the way for others to build successful careers at the ABC and make important contributions to Australian journalism and culture.

2 Catherine Horne Fisher, 'Greenwood, Irene Adelaide (1898–1992)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, published online 2017, accessed online 11 January 2023, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/greenwood-irene-adelaide-25528/text33876.

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