

**“Wild Jill”: Jill Roe and the Reshaping of Australian Women’s History’**  
**Australian Women’s History Network - Special Panel**  
**Australian Historical Association conference, University of Newcastle, 5 July 2017**

**Speaker: Professor Melanie Oppenheimer, Flinders University**

I would like to thank Sophie, Isobelle, Chelsea and James and the Australian Women’s History Network more broadly for the kind invitation and opportunity to speak about Jill and her legacy.

I’m not sure about ‘wild Jill’ – by the time we both met I think we had both ‘settled down’ a little! On the outside at least!

I first met Jill in late 1991 when I sought her out about supervising me for a PhD thesis. I remember being a little scared and intimidated about the meeting – would she be interested in my topic, would she agree to supervise me, would she like me - all the insecurities a young historian has. I remember it so clearly, as if it was yesterday - finding her office in W6 Building at Macquarie University – it was late spring, she was wearing a white spotted organdie shirt, I don’t know why I remember that. We sat down and I explained to her what I wanted to do – I told her about the 20,000-word thesis I’d completed in 1988 as part of a M. Litt through UNE. It was based on my grandmother and her role as a Red Cross VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) at the end of WWII. She was part of a medical unit on board British aircraft carrier *HMS Glory* that sailed around the Pacific from September-December 1945 picking up ex-POWs and others displaced by the war. I told Jill there had been precious little research on voluntary labour on the Australian home front during WWII and I want to explore this further in a PhD examining voluntary organisations such as the Australian Red Cross, Australian Comforts Fund, the Salvation Army and the YMCA.

She jumped up out of her chair, very excitedly, and said “**Titmuss**”! You must read Titmuss [Richard Morris Titmuss held the founding chair of Social Policy at the London School of Economics; he had written *Problems of Social Policy* as part of the WWII British Official War History; and later *Commitment to Welfare* (1968) and *The Gift Relationship* (1971)]. He was well-known for the phrase ‘When we study welfare

systems, we see they reflect the dominant cultural and political character of their societies’.

And Frank **Prochaska**, you must read Prochaska – *The Voluntary Impulse. Philanthropy in Modern Britain* (published in 1988). Jill’s copy says 1989. I now have a confession to make. Jill loaned me her copy on that day and...I never gave it back – I’m pleased I didn’t as I now have a book of hers as a keepsake but I’m sorry Jill!]. Clearly both these historians had an enormous influence on Jill in her writing on social policy and informed her work in this field. Jill’s 1976 edited book, *Social Policy in Australia. Some Perspectives 1901-1975* is a case in point. This was an important book – it pulled together mostly published articles; PhD chapters etc into one collection. The history of social policy was a relatively new field in Australia in the early 1970s and Jill was helping to foster and develop it.

Anyway, I digress. I was awarded a PhD scholarship in 1992 and so began my tutelage under Jill at Macquarie. (Also studying at MU were Bridget Griffin Foley; Paul Ashton; Maree Murray amongst others – our gang). The premise underlying my PhD thesis was around the concept of voluntary action (William Beveridge – father of the British welfare state) and the concept of a ‘moving frontier’. British historian Geoffrey Finlayson (whose book *Citizen, State and Social Welfare in Britain, 1830-1990* was published posthumously by Clarendon Press, Oxford in 1994) took up Beveridge’s term that examines the relationship between voluntarism and the state. My study on the Australian home front during WWII argued that 1939-45 was a high point for this moving frontier; and that the relationship waxed and waned through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After publishing my thesis as the book, *All Work. No Pay. Australian Volunteers in War* in 2002, this was a theme I continued to explore in my later 2008 book, *Volunteering. Why we can’t survive without it*.

Gender has probably played a more important role in the shifting dynamics of voluntary action in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century than anything else. Changing roles of women has disrupted the norms and status quo and there’s been no turning back. WWII in particular, then the 1960s/70s has fundamentally recast roles of women and the impact on voluntary action and volunteering has been profound.

The years rolled by – Jill went to Harvard - I was appointed as a Lecturer Level A in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Australian History at UWS (now Western Sydney University) in February 1995 – and I completed the PhD and graduated in 1997. In February 2000, along with my colleague Jeni Warburton, we received funding from the Academy of the Social Sciences to run a workshop on the future of volunteering in Australia. Held just months before the Sydney Olympics, it was a heady time for volunteering as it became part of a new political landscape. At the time you didn't have to be a Fellow of the Academy to apply for the workshops (as happens now), one just needed to have a Fellow involved – well, Jill was our Fellow. It was also the first time an Academy of the Social Sciences workshop had been held at the University of Western Sydney. We asked Jill to open the workshop and she attended along with other leading volunteer and third sector scholars such as Michael Pusey (who coined the phrase 'economic rationalism'); Duncan Ironmonger; Cora Baldock; Michael Bittman; Jenny Onyx etc. An edited book based on the workshop was published by The Federation Press in September of 2000, *Volunteers and Volunteering*.

Again, in 2008, Jill was there as part of an invited symposium on 'William Beveridge's *Voluntary Action*, 60 Years on'. Because Beveridge had played a key role in my evolution as a historian, I organized the symposium in London in November 2008, with the Menzies Centre for Australian Studies (and Frank Bongiorno), and the Voluntary Action History Society (my colleague and friend Georgina Brewis). The symposium was held in great splendour in the Downer Room at the Australian High Commission in The Strand. Presenters included Pat Thane, Jose Harris, Beveridge's biographer and I finally got to meet Frank Prochaska! Jill delivered a paper on 'Voluntary action and the rural poor in the age of globalisation' that later formed a chapter in the edited book, *Beveridge and Voluntary Action in Britain and the wider British World* published by Manchester University Press in 2011.

In some ways, my work connected with Jill's earlier 1970s work on Australian social policy as well as the last main area of research interest for her – which was a personal one – rural Australia and specifically the history of Eyre Peninsula in South Australia where she grew up. Moving to Flinders University in 2013, provided Jill and I with another point of personal connection. We would meet in the State Library in Adelaide when she was researching her Eyre Peninsula book. She also attended a SA on the Eve

of War symposium in 2014 and her last work was published posthumously in an edited collection from that symposium that came out in May this year. Co-edited by myself, Mandy Paul and Margaret Anderson, the collection entitled, *SA on the Eve of War*, contains chapters by Jill and former SA Premier and historian, John Bannon, both no longer with us.

There have been some wonderful obituaries written for Jill. Lucy Taksa in the latest issue of *Labour History* (no 112, May 2017) writes about Jill's role in developing labour history in particular. She mentions an event (that Mary Spongberg and I organized) in February 2004 to honour Jill's life and work; and that it was held at the same time as a "New Directions in Australian Women's History" conference. Jill's impact on Australian women's history was significant – whether through her interests in labour history, social and cultural history, religion and intellectual history, biography and literary history, and local history – her over-arching commitment has been to Australian women's history – that has been at the core of her work through her career.

The supervisor-student relationship can be very hit and miss – for me, I was lucky. It was transformative. She was my mentor and supporter. She helped foster and support my career – she was there from the beginning. She wrote endless references for me, all with good grace.

She welcomed me into the history fraternity. I continue to work with international scholars such as Pat Thane, and that's thanks to Jill. She also suggested that I put myself forward to serve organisations like the AHA – to give back to the history profession. When she was President, I became a member of the Ex Ctt and then found myself Treasurer for 4 years. She was inclusive. The important point to make, however, is I don't think my experience was in any way special. That's what she was like. She has been an important mentor for the profession – that has had an impact on women historians more broadly – is key to her legacy as well. That's why we all miss her.