

“Wild Jill”: Jill Roe and the Reshaping of Australian Women’s History’
Australian Women’s History Network - Special Panel
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Speaker: Angela Woollacott, Manning Clark Professor of History, ANU

I am honoured to be part of this panel paying tribute to Jill Roe. It is very fitting that we should do so here, at this annual meeting of the Australian Women’s History Network, given her pioneering role in the field of Australian women’s history. And especially appropriate to do so at a conference of the AHA, of which Jill was a true institution builder.

Some of you may be familiar with the poem published by Ethel Castilla in 1900, titled ‘The Australian Girl’. One of its stanzas runs:

Her frank, clear eyes bespeak a mind

Old-world traditions fail to bind

She is not shy

Or bold, but simply self-possessed.

Her independence adds a zest

Unto her speech, her piquant jest,

Her quaint reply.

To some extent, this stanza captures a bit of Jill herself, but of course one of the classic ‘Australian girls’ of the turn of the 20th century was Sybylla Melvyn, the determined protagonist of Miles Franklin’s *My Brilliant Career*. As Daniela Torsh wrote in one of the many wonderful obituaries about Jill in recent months, we can see connections between Jill herself, Miles Franklin and Sybylla Melvyn.

Some of the connections are obvious: like Miles Franklin, Jill grew up in the bush. In Jill’s case it was on South Australia’s Eyre Peninsula, to whose history Jill dedicated her last book *Our Fathers Cleared the Bush: Remembering Eyre Peninsula*, both a family history and

a history of the land and society. Bev Kingston tells us that the book was inspired in part by Miles Franklin's memoir *Childhood at Brindabella*. It wasn't just the bush that Jill and Miles had in common. In becoming the foremost scholar of Miles Franklin's life and work, Jill must have been drawn to Franklin's dedication to literature and to the fostering of Australian writing; her principled nature and the seriousness of purpose that coexisted with her irreverence; and her carving out of a singular, solo life when it was not easy for women to do so. More than that, one can't help but think that Jill was drawn to Franklin's very feistiness. Again, Bev points us in this direction by noting, in her moving obituary published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, that: 'As a student, her energy and originality had gained her a reputation as "Wild Jill".'

Jill and I bonded when I was offered the chair she had held at Macquarie, following her retirement. Still an active part of the department, Jill would give me counsel when I was Head. She encouraged me to join the AHA Executive Committee; and showed constant interest in my own work, including inviting me to write an entry on Rose Quong when she and Chris Cunneen edited the special volume for the ADB to incorporate those who had been overlooked for reasons such as race and gender. When Adrian Carton and I took over teaching the course on War and Peace in World History she had originated, she brought me folders full of readings and notes. She was glad we had taken the course on, and that it had strong enrolments – though she thought that, in our enthusiasm to incorporate a good deal of imperial and post-colonial history, we had not given enough emphasis to her favourite topic of feminist pacifism.

As others have said, in thinking about Jill's special qualities, I find when I picture her there is always that mischievous sparkle, quick wit and ability to get straight to the point. And then there is all of the hard work, and the accomplishments.

Jill understood that a healthy discipline needed strong institutional pillars. She served two terms as President of the AHA, from 1998 to 2002, providing the association with stability and continuity. Even after those years she was one of the organization's great boosters and a promoter of women within its ranks. The AHA's Jill Roe Prize is a highly appropriate memorial.

She was a great stalwart of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, publishing 20 entries for it, the first being in 1969. Jill joined the ADB's editorial board in 1985 and stayed on it for the rest of her life, chairing it for ten years. She also contributed dedicated service to the NSW Working Party. Another significant contribution was her service as Director of the Macquarie University Centre for the Macquarie PEN anthology of Australian literature project.

As a historian, Jill's interests were broad. She supported labour history and had a longstanding interest in religious history. Bev tells us that during the year Jill was at Harvard, she did some work in the Christian Science archives in Boston. Two of her major books began as ADB entries. Her entry on George Arundale, third president of the worldwide Theosophical Society, grew to become her major study *Beyond Belief: Theosophy in Australia 1879-1939*. Besides being fascinating, theosophy of course is an important dimension to the history of feminism.

Which brings me back to Jill's core contribution to women's history. Her work on Miles Franklin also began as an ADB entry, and then it took over her life. Because I'm now working on a biography, I confess it terrifies me that Jill took 26 + years to write her magnum opus (though I know mine won't come to 709 pages!). It is a magisterial work for multiple reasons. It is exhaustively researched and beautifully written. Perhaps above all its great achievement is having taken such a puzzling and important figure from Australian history, and rendering Franklin with the depth and perspicacity she deserves – fleshing out all aspects of her life and work both national and international. Further, Jill situates and explicates Franklin's feminism. As Nicole Moore put it so well in her review of the book: 'Roe is conjuring an almost lost world in which nationalism was a progressive stance, with the promise of the new nation grown not only from radical labour politics and bush-based egalitarianism but the solidarity with the oppressed that the best militant feminism of the period advocated. This was the feminism that Australia's franchised women led the world in and that Franklin was proud to represent in the laggard suffrage struggles of the US and

Britain.' [*The Australian*] As Nicole suggests, Jill went beyond biography to give us an important aspect of Australia's national foundations.

Giving us Miles Franklin with the gravitas and stature she warranted was probably Jill's major contribution, but there were so many more – as a scholar, a teacher and supervisor, a discipline builder and a kind, witty and generous colleague and friend.