Delegates to the Australian Women's Conference in Brisbane, 1909. State Library of Queensland

Beginning a New Century of Women's Suffrage History?

New scholarship is documenting the suffragists' place in Australia's commemorative landscapes, the promise and partiality of digital archives, and reconsidering the voting restrictions that complicate narratives of 'universal' suffrage in the twentieth century.

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On 3 December 2008, the Victorian government unveiled the 'Great Petition', a 20-metre-long bluestone and steel monument commemorating the colony's 1891 'monster' suffrage petition. The event concluded Australia's 'long' suffrage centenary decade (1994–2008), an era peppered with state and federal anniversaries, each prompting reflections on feminist pasts and futures as well as a deluge of scholarship on the structure, tactics and ideologies of the suffragist coalitions.

Despite the enthusiasm for once 'forgotten' histories that now occupy pride of place in a rejuvenated story about the nation's egalitarian tradition, the suffragists remain marginalised in commemorative landscapes. Denizens of Sydney and Hobart will struggle to find public acknowledgements of these feminist foremothers, while Canberra's Centenary of Women's Suffrage Commemorative Fountain—a replacement for a sculpture planned for the city's land-axis but cancelled by the Liberal government in 2003—is hidden behind Parliament House and has been closed for repairs since 2023.

The 'Great Petition' is thus unusual for its prominence, dwarfing Adelaide's busts of suffragettes and Perth's 'Bookleaf Memorial'. It also depicts the enterprise and solidarity of the movement, rather than celebrating emblematic individual contributions.

» James Keating, 'Beginning a New Century of Women's Suffrage History?' *Agora* 59:3 (2024), 36–39 «

One response among historians writing in the second century of so-called universal suffrage has been to contextualise this reluctance to commemorate even those feminist icons who have permeated the popular historical consciousness as a product of Australia's 'bronze ceiling'. After all, fewer than one-fifth of statues in capital cities represent women.

Inspired by suffrage memorial 'booms' in Britain and the United States, the pressure group A Monument of One's Own—founded by historian Clare Wright—fought for the erection of a statue of trade unionist Zelda D'Aprano outside Melbourne's Trades Hall.[1] Wright's advocacy also prompted the City of Melbourne to launch a funding appeal for a statue of the suffragist Vida Goldstein. Such actions seek not only to rectify the masculinist cast of Australian history but remind us about the suffragists' foundational assertion of women's right to public space.

Yet, amid the global reckoning for memorials dedicated to 'colonisers and racists', questions remain about whether statues—typically celebratory and lacking the nuance of critical scholarship—allow us to see the suffragists as fully human. As well as being feminist heroines, they were 'messy people' with complex politics.[2]

Such debates have also inspired scholarly consideration of the suffragists' mnemonic practices. Feminist history is buttressed by the prescience of 'memory-keepers' like Sydneysider Ruby Rich (1888–1988), whose life-long collection, preservation and accession of women's papers served as a bulwark against historical omission.[3]

Recent scrutiny of prominent 'suffrage relics' like the 'Trust the Women' banner created by Anglo-Australian artist Dora Meeson Coates—which was held aloft through the streets of London during the Women's Coronation Procession of 1911 and has been hanging in Australia's Parliament House since 1990—shows how memorialisation has shaped popular and academic understandings of the past. In what remains a shallow commemorative landscape, reifying such objects risks embedding imported suffrage narratives—in this case the familiar iconography of the spectacular British campaign—in place of the material record of Australian activists' 'quiet' toil.[4]

Suffrage History in the Digital Archive

Suffrage history has been transformed by mass digitisation. A glance at the footnotes of many recent books reveals that Trove, the National Library of Australia's digital heritage portal, has fuelled a boom in popular suffrage writing—the first since the centenary decade. These new tools can substantiate ideas, movements and lives that straddled borders, so it's perhaps not suprising that a defining characteristic of twenty-first century histories of suffrage-era feminism is the refusal to consider 'suffrage, feminism or any other movement of this era as a "national" ... construct'.[5]

In my research, determining the birth and marital names of Madge Donohoe (1864–1910), let alone tracing her career as headmistress of Kogarah Girls' School turned globe-trotting suffrage lecturer, would have been unfathomable without collating thousands of digitised fragments from New South Wales newspapers, her columns in the global Anglophone press, London social registers, and snippets gleaned from a plethora of international feminist publications.[6]

In particular, the digitisation of women's franchise petitions—the most recognisable symbols of the colonial campaigns—in Queensland, South Australia and Victoria has enriched our understanding of the suffragists' spatial organisation and local mobilisation strategies. Rather than privileging the movements' leaders, such databases draw focus to the 'rank and file': the women of, say, working-class North Carlton who took up the door-knockers' pens as they filed down Davis Street.[7]

1 'The Problem', A Monument of One's Own, https://www.amonumentofonesown.com/theproblem.

2 Yves Rees, 'Australia's Feminists Are Finally Being Memorialised. Can We Grapple with their Racism?', *Crikey*, 14 June 2024, https://www.crikey.com.au/2024/06/14/australias-feminists-memorialised-racism/.

3 Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, 'Ruby Rich's Dream Library: Feminist Memory-keeping as an Archive of Affective Mnemonic Practices', *Literature* 4: (2024): 62–74.

4 James Keating, '"Trust the Women": Dora Meeson Coates's Suffrage Banner and the Popular Construction of Australia's Feminist Past in the Late Twentieth Century', *Histoire Sociale / Social History* 56: 116 (2023): 369–90.

5 Angela Woollacott, 'Australian Women's Metropolitan Activism: From Suffrage, to Imperial Vanguard, to Commonwealth Feminism,' in *Women's Suffrage in the British Empire: Citizenship, Nation, and Race,* eds. Ian Christopher Fletcher, Laura E. Nym Mayhall and Philippa Levine (Oxford: Routledge, 2000), 208.

6 James Keating, *Distant Sisters: Australasian Women and the International Struggle for the Vote, 1880–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 82–89.

7 Brienne Callahan, 'The "Monster Petition" and the Women of Davis Street,' *Provenance: The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria*, 7: (2008): 96–104; Deborah Jordan, 'The Role of Petitions in the Mobilization of Women for the Right to Vote: The Case of Queensland, Australia, 1894, 1897,' *Journal of Women's History* 29:3 (2017): 84–109.

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> ... in common with most Indigenous people under colonial rule, webs of social, legal and administrative obstruction—rooted in settler prejudices about the limits of political subjecthood—constrained some Aboriginal people's voting rights until 1962 at the federal level and 1965 in some states.

By rendering once-obscure subjects visible, digitised petition sheets can also produce poignant encounters with the past. Upon hearing the subject of this article, a friend related her discovery of her great-great-grandmother's name inked proudly on Victoria's 1891 petition—intimate evidence that she had not been, as family legend held, illiterate. Other platforms, such as the Suffrage Postcard Project and Sites of Feminist Memory, employ innovative data visualisation and digital archival techniques to produce new knowledge and teaching resources concerning suffrage visual culture, artefacts and memorials, as well as inviting readers to shape ongoing research.[8]

While acknowledging the transformative effects of databases like Trove—whose sheer volume has allowed historians to fashion 'new narratives of women's lives'—feminist scholars remain wary about the distortions of the digital.[9] Beyond debates about bias and silences within the archive, and fears about the rise of a new digital positivism, Tim Sherratt's insider's guide to Trove is vital reading for users seeking to fathom its limits and possibilities.[10]

In any case, the colonial press fascinated and frustrated the suffragists. They lobbied tirelessly to publicise their causes in its pages but, exasperated by editorial misogyny and limited column space, established dozens of their own mastheads.[11] These publications were painstakingly curated by editors who had forged elaborate postal networks to gather and share news, cartoons and propaganda, and build solidarity with like-minded activists across the world.[12] Titles such as Louisa Lawson's iconic *Dawn* (1888–1905)—hosted on Trove since 2012 thanks to a crowd-funding campaign—and the influential and still offline *Woman's Suffrage Journal* (1891–1892), were not only conduits for ideology but artefacts that document the richness of the suffragists' intellectual and social lives.

However, we must stay vigilant about the 'seductive' quality of digital sources and remember that they remain partial.[13] For example, Laura Rademaker's novel account of sectarianism within the New South Wales suffrage movement relies on a close reading of undigitised feminist and religious publications.[14]

In the case of colonial newspapers, it bears remembering that, however diligently we read sources 'against the grain', their pages typically offer pressmen's perspectives on public events and lives. Although writing about a life like Donohoe's would have been unthinkable in the pre-digital era, only the analogue record—letters, minute books and organisational reports—allowed me to reassemble the private ecosystems of emotional and financial support that allowed her to spread Australian ideas in European feminist circles for over a decade.

Conditional Citizenship: Complicating Universal Suffrage

Taking cues from scholars of women's enfranchisement in the decolonising world, revisionist histories of suffrage in Australia and elsewhere have begun to question narratives of democratic expansion that centre on archetypal victories that bridged disenfranchisement with 'universal'

8 'The Suffrage Postcard Project', The Suffrage Postcard Project, https://thesuffragepostcardproject.omeka.net/; 'A Map of Memorials to the Women's Suffrage Movement', Sites of Feminist Memory, https://framacarte.org/fr/map/sites-of-feminist-memory-a-map-of-memorials-to-the_82076#3/17.98/56.34.

9 Catherine Bishop, 'The Serendipity of Connectivity: Piecing Together Women's Lives in the Digital Archive,' *Women's History Review* 26:5 (2017): 766–80; Kathryn M. Hunter, 'Silence in Noisy Archives: Reflections on Judith Allen's "Evidence and Silence – Feminism and the Limits of History" (1986) in the Era of Mass Digitisation,' *Australian Feminist Studies* 32:91–92 (2017): 201–12.

10 Tim Sherratt, 'Trove Data Guide,' https://tdg.glam-workbench.net/home.html.

11 Ana Stevenson, 'Imagining Women's Suffrage: Frontier Landscapes and the Transnational Print Culture of Australia, New Zealand, and the United States,' *Pacific Historical Review* 87:4 (2018): 638–66; Natasha Walker and Catherine Dewhirst, '"Virtually a Victory": The Australian Woman's Sphere and the Mainstream Press during Vida Goldstein's 1903 Federal Candidature', in *Voices of Challenge in Australia's Migrant and Minority Press*, eds. Catherine Dewhirst and Richard Scully (Cham: Palgrave, 2021), 193–219.

12 Keating, *Distant Sisters*, 144–69.

13 Hunter, 'Silence in Noisy Archives,' 210.

***Great Petition* is a sculpture located near the Victorian State Parliament Building. It was unveiled on 3 December 2008 to commemorate the centenary of women's suffrage in Victoria.** Guy Nolch

suffrage. Rather than fixating on 'pioneer' victories—a symptom of the Western obsession with origins—we might instead remember those whose electoral rights remained uncertain, under threat or denied altogether.[15]

As we know, not *all* women could vote in 1894, 1902, or 1908. Suffragist activism ensured that white women rode a wave of democratisation that allowed the colonists to boast they were the world's 'most fully enfranchised' people.[16] These same campaigners were also complicit in the progressive settler state's efforts to ensure that some floundered in its wake: the *Commonwealth Franchise Act* barred most people of colour, including Indigenous people, from voting. Thus, Clare Wright's *You Daughters of Freedom* begins with the salutary reminder that such foundational injustices strip 'the gloss off [the] patriotic gloating' that once characterised the study of Australia's democratic experiments.[17]

Instead, and in common with most Indigenous people under colonial rule, webs of social, legal and administrative obstruction—rooted in settler prejudices about the limits of political subjecthood—constrained some Aboriginal people's voting rights until 1962 at the federal level and 1965 in some states.[18] Such forms of practical exclusion from the franchise were, by design, confusing.

Thus, during the planning of the South Australian women's suffrage centenary (1994), organisers 'experienced moments of immense panic and confusion' because they were unaware that the colony had enfranchised all adult citizens in 1894 and thus could celebrate an 'untainted' universal suffrage. Like many Australians, they believed that the 1967 referendum constituted a turning point in Indigenous voting rights, rather than expanding the Commonwealth's lawmaking powers in respect to Indigenous peoples and mandating their inclusion in census data.[19] That it is remembered otherwise, Russell McGregor contends, is an example of the redemptive power of 'self-congratulatory' national mythology: 'it was we "the Australian people" … who secured rights and equality' for Aboriginal people—a narrative that omits decades of Aboriginal campaigning.[20]

Such unease with tidy suffrage narratives, and whose interests they might serve, is far from new. As trade unionist Della Nicholls pointedly reminded guests at the United Associations of Women's celebration of fifty years of federal enfranchisement in 1954, 'there is [still] no such thing as Commonwealth-wide franchise for Aborigines'.[21] Perhaps, then, we are not in the second century of so-called universal suffrage and its histories, but stranded in the first, 41 years until the centenary of a truly democratic nation.

14 Laura Rademaker, '"A Miserable Sectarian Spirit": Sectarianism and the Women's Movement in Early Twentieth-century New South Wales,' *Labour History* 112: (2017): 175–90.

15 Louise Edwards and Mina Roces, 'Introduction: Orienting the Global Women's Suffrage Movement,' in *Women's Suffrage in Asia: Gender, Nationalism and Democracy*, eds. Louise Edwards and Mina Roces (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1–24; Ann Curthoys and Jessie Mitchell, *Taking Liberty: Indigenous Rights and Settler Self-government in Colonial Australia, 1830–1890* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

16 Clare Wright, '"A Splendid Object Lesson": A Transnational Perspective on the Birth of the Australian Nation', *Journal of Women's History* 26:4 (2014): 14.

17 Clare Wright, *You Daughters of Freedom: The Australians Who Won the Vote and Inspired the World* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2018), x.

18 Jan Cooper, 'In the Beginning Were Words: Aboriginal People and the Franchise,' *Journal of Australian Studies* 42:4 (2018): 428–44.

19 Vicki Crowley, 'Acts of Memory and Imagination: Reflections on Women's Suffrage and the Centenary Celebrations of Suffrage in South Australia in 1994,' *Australian Feminist Studies* 16:35 (2001): 225.

20 Russell McGregor, 'The 1967 Referendum: An Uncertain Consensus', in *Turning Points in Australian History*, eds. Martin Crotty and David Roberts (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008), 171–83.

21 'Aust. Women Celebrate Victory', *Tribune*, 27 January 1954, 9, http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article212472996.