



Victorian Women's Liberation and Lesbian Feminist Archives Inc

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ABSTRACT

With this paper, I first of all acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the traditional owners of the land in Australia. I go on to mention early radical actions by lesbians and womyn, including setting up the Queen Victoria Women's Hospital in 1896, and how lesbians and feminists in Victoria joined the worldwide Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) to fight for womyn's rights from 1969 onwards. The paper explains why there was a need to set up a WLM Archives in the first place, the herstory of the Victorian Women's Liberation and Lesbian Feminist Archives (VWLLFA) and the reasons for maintaining and adding to the collection into the new millennium. The Victorian Women's Liberation and Lesbian Feminist Archives Inc was established in 1983 with the objective of collecting any and all of the material relating to the WLM in Victoria from 1969 onwards; to store, archive and preserve this material for posterity and make it accessible for research and other purposes. Now housed at the University of Melbourne Archives, the VWLLFA is a unique record of the enormous amount of political work lesbians and feminists in Victoria have done over the past 50 years.

KEYWORDS

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; lesbians and feminists; Women's Liberation Movement; Victorian Women's Liberation and Lesbian Feminist Archives; University of Melbourne Archives

The importance of acknowledging country at every opportunity

I, too, want to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Woiwurrung language group of the Kulin nation as the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on here today. I pay tribute to the Elders past and present and to those who died in defence of their land and their culture and their way of life. I also acknowledge and pay my respects to all the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here today.

I particularly also want to pay tribute to two Aboriginal womyn.¹ Most of us have heard of the Tasmanian Aboriginal womyn, Truganini. Not so well known is that after she and her companions arrived in Melbourne in 1839 they were abandoned by the Chief Protector of Aborigines, George Robinson, and joined the armed resistance here in Victoria. After Truganini and four of her friends were arrested and put on trial for the murder of two sealers in Westernport Bay, the two Tasmanian Aboriginal men were the first people to be hanged in

Melbourne in 1842. Truganini, Fanny and Matilda were deported back to Tasmania where, in the last years of her life in Hobart, Truganini became famous.

Most people have heard about William Barak, who was the Ngurungaeta and spokesperson of the Woiwurrung people. Barak's sister Annie Boorat is not so well known. Annie married Andrew, a Gunai/Kurnai man, and they had a son, Robert Wandoon. Annie Boorat and her family were forced to move from Gippsland to Coranderk in 1863, where her children and grandchildren were born and raised. Annie Boorat is the direct ancestor of all the Wurundjeri people alive today.

Dedication to a deceased member of the VWLLFA Collective

I want to dedicate this paper to Sara Elkas, who was a member of the Victorian Women's Liberation and Lesbian Feminist Archives (VWLLFA) from early 2000 until she died in March 2017. Sara was not only an active member of Women Against Rape (WAR) and the phone information, referral and support service, Women's Liberation Switchboard, during the 1980s, which operated out of the Women's Liberation Building (see Figure 1), but into the 1990s she was a founding and contributing member of the Matrix Guild for lesbians over 40, the Jewish Lesbian Group of Victoria, and the Performing Older Women's Circus for womyn over 40.

Sara is just one example of the dedication of lesbian feminists to the principles and practices of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) and social justice here in Victoria, and followed that through by ensuring that our herstorical documents were preserved for posterity.

Womyn in Victoria have a long and honourable herstory of radical activism against patriarchal oppression

To mention just two major actions. The Queen Victoria Women's Hospital was set up by womyn doctors in 1896 to enable them to practise medicine with womyn patients in a hospital setting because the patriarchy at the time did not allow womyn doctors to work in hospitals, including the Women's Hospital.

The first organisation in Australia to fight for votes for womyn was the Victorian Women's Suffrage Society, established in 1884, which helped organise the monster petition with over 30,000 signatures from womyn, but again the entrenched sexism of the male politicians meant that Victoria was the last state to give womyn the vote in 1908.

The beginning stages of the lesbian and womyn's revolution

Fast-forward to the late 1960s where it appeared, judging by the reports that were broadcast from the US about womyn protesting at an Anti-Miss America Pageant in 1968, and who had supposedly burnt their bras to demonstrate their point about womyn's oppression, that a revolution had started.

After years of continual harassment by the police, the Stonewall Rebellion by lesbians, gays and trans in New York in June 1969 was the very radical beginning of the Lesbian and Gay Liberation Movement.



Figure 1. Women's Liberation House Shop Front, 295 Victoria Street, West Melbourne. Photographer: Unknown c.1980s. Victorian Women's Liberation and Lesbian Feminist Archives, 2016.0266.

The revolution for the liberation of lesbians and womyn caught on here in Victoria

On 26 May 1969, Justice Menhennitt ruled that if a doctor believed it was necessary to procure an abortion in order 'to preserve the woman from serious danger to her life or her physical or mental health', then under these particular circumstances an abortion was not deemed to be unlawful, thereby making abortions legal for the first time.

Conditions for single mothers were so demoralising, in that many womyn were forced to relinquish their children for adoption, that a Single Mothers' Group was formed on 24 June 1969. Renamed the Council for the Single Mother and Her Child (CSMC), CSMC was ultimately successful in pressuring the government to introduce the first Single Mothers Pension in 1973.

The first lesbian group in Australia, Daughters of Bilitis, (DOB, named after and affiliated with DOB in the USA, established in 1955), was set up in Melbourne in 1969 to organise around the rights of lesbians. By early 1970 DOB advertised their PO box number, put ads in *The Age* and Francesca Curtis was interviewed on *The Bailey File* on TV by Tania Haylesworth. DOB changed its name to the Australasian Lesbian Movement in July 1970.

After years of fighting for equal pay for womyn, a decision was handed down by the Arbitration Commission on 19 June 1969 to the effect that 10% of female workers covered by federal awards in a variety of occupations in Victoria were entitled to equal pay for equal

work. Incensed by this paltry decision, on 21 October 1969 Zelda D'Aprano and several womyn supporters made their way to the Commonwealth Building in La Trobe Street, where one end of a chain was quickly padlocked to the door handles and the other end padlocked round Zelda's waist. Ten days later there were three womyn, Thelma Solomon, Alva Geikie and Zelda, who chained themselves to the doors of the Arbitration Court to continue protesting about equal pay.

Thus, the WLM was established in Victoria to address the injustices towards lesbians and womyn and the fight for liberation against oppression began.

The fight for womyn's liberation

On 2 March 1970, the Women's Action Committee (WAC) was set up by Zelda, Thelma, Alva and Bon Hull. WAC organised several successful actions, such as the Anti-Miss Teenage Quest Demo and the Equal Pay Tram Rides, where these womyn only paid a fraction of the fare to publicise their cause. Women's Liberation Area Groups proliferated, the Action for Adequate Child-Care was established, the first National WLM Conference was organised and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* was published.

By 1971, CAMP, the Campaign Against Moral Persecution, and dozens of Consciousness-Raising Groups were set up in Melbourne by and for womyn to develop feminist theory and put that theory into practice.

1972 was the year when the WLM came into its own in Victoria. Germaine Greer visited, and the Child-Care Action Group, Women's Electoral Lobby, the Gay Liberation Front, The Children's Book Group, Women's Prison Action Group, the Equal Pay Committee, Women's Abortion Action Campaign and the Working Women's Coalition were set up. International Women's Day saw over three thousand womyn take to the streets, the Women's Liberation Centre was established as a meeting place for WLM groups at 16 Little La Trobe Street, *Betty Can Jump* was performed by womyn at the Pram Factory, Weekend Conferences were held at Sorrento, *Women's Liberation Newsletter* and *Vashti's Voice* were published on a regular basis, and Zap Actions were organised.

At the same time, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy was established in Canberra and the Victorian Nindethana Theatre, and the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service were set up in Melbourne.

I was a married mother of two and a mature-age, first-year student at La Trobe University in 1972. By the time I left my first meeting with the Brunswick Consciousness-Raising Group towards the end of that year, I was already politicised. My marriage broke up within weeks and I was more than ready and willing to engage with the radical politics of the WLM.

The WLM is both a personal and a political force for change

I could go on and on naming all of the Women's Liberation groups, conferences, publications and actions that took place in the WLM over the next two decades. But just to mention a significant few: WAR was set up in 1973 to change the laws that discriminated against womyn and to support womyn who were raped; as was the Radicalesbians, who organised the first National Radicalesbian Conference in Sorrento and the first Womyn Only Dance, and helped establish Amazon Acres in NSW in 1974. Also in 1974, the Women's Theatre Group devised, wrote and performed their own plays, the first Melbourne Women's Health

Clinic provided a radical alternative for womyn's health needs, and the first womyn's refuge in Victoria, WL Halfway House, provided a safe and supportive refuge for womyn and children fleeing domestic violence.

In other words, it was lesbians and radical feminists who by 1974 had set up activist collectives and took radical actions around abortion, rape, domestic violence and lesbianism to bring these and other significant issues to public attention and show just how badly society's attitudes and actions impacted on womyn. And then demonstrated, by setting up womyn's refuges and Rape Crisis Centres, how womyn needed to be protected from oppressive and brutal male behaviour.

They were exciting and heady times, the 1970s. We thought that we were changing the world and that it was only a matter of time before everyone caught on, realised what a mess the world was in under patriarchy and started adopting feminist ideology and putting it into practice.

The herstory of the Women's Liberation Archives

Another fast-forward to 1982. The WLM as established by radical lesbian feminist, radical feminist and socialist feminist activism had been going for about thirteen years when four WLM activists, Vig Geddes, Sue Jackson, Marg Jacobs and Barb Friday, formed a reading and discussion group in 1982 based on early Women's Liberation publications.

It wasn't long before they realised that some of the periodicals and conference papers were already hard to come by. This didn't augur well for future reference if they didn't immediately do something about the material that was still left. As a result, the group refocused its direction and purpose and decided to establish a WL Archive to ensure that our precious WLM material was saved for posterity.

There was already a precedent. The Australian Gay Archives, as it was called then (the word 'lesbian' was added in 1990), had been set up in 1978 to collect and preserve any and all material relating to the lesbian and gay communities in Australia. However, the WL Archives had a slightly different and more politically oriented focus.

It was out of this concern to safeguard the documented herstory of the WLM, arguably one of the important revolutionary movements of the twentieth century, that the Women's Liberation Archives was founded. The first recorded meeting was held on 1 March 1983 in Fairfield with the four activists, Vig, Jackson, Marg and Barb, in attendance. The items on the agenda included opening a cheque account, working out a collection policy and, one of the abiding concerns of any archives group, finding a place to house this unique collection. By the sixth meeting, it was agreed that the aims of the Archives group were to collect, catalogue, make accessible, house, produce, increase awareness about and hold in trust all of the WLM material in Victoria from 1969 onwards.

The WL Archives group made contact with other radical feminist activists and feminist groups to acquire additional material and to attract members. They wrote articles to spread the word about what they intended doing and organised a raffle which raised \$700. Out of a concern that they wanted this material and information about the WLM to be available to others, they did some research into some of the issues and actions of the first three years of the WLM in Victoria, 1969–72. And produced, in conjunction with the very first feminist offset printing press, Sybylla Press, a calendar for 1984, which sold for \$1.50.

The WL Archives group had been going for a year when I joined in March 1984. The group was receiving more and more donations of material from activist feminists and the need for a space to store all the material was becoming critical. Again with Sybylla Press, we published another calendar for 1985 which featured Equal Pay, Films, International Women's Day, Refuges, Rape, Health, Periodicals, Queensland, Conferences, Women's Studies, WLM and Housing during the years 1974–75.

As I was also volunteering at the WL Switchboard based at the WL Building at 295 Victoria Street West Melbourne, I was aware that the *Melbourne WL Newsletter* had stopped production and that their large upstairs room at the WL Building had been abandoned and would be an ideal location for the Archives.

We moved into the room in November 1985, thereby establishing a mutually agreeable connection with the other activist collectives in the WL Building that was to last for almost seven years.

Almost immediately, I began to archive the material in the donations already to hand and to sort them into some semblance of order. We decided to maintain all the collections under the name of the individual donor or the name of the collective (often defunct). For the next few years the Archives received a great deal of material from lesbian and feminist activists and, being in the WL Building, we were in the perfect position to also pick up on the material left behind by defunct collectives, including all the material from WAR and the Melbourne WL Newsletter collective.

We produced a third calendar with Sybylla Press for 1987 featuring the years 1976–77. When the WL Halfway House collective asked us to archive and store their sensitive material in 1987, it was agreed that their files would be more securely stored in the spare room in my house rather than at the WL Building.

By working either on Switchboard or the Archives, I was on hand to enable students to have access to the Archives room for research. Eventually, and despite our regular fundraisers, we could no longer afford the building in Victoria Street and by mid November 1988 the Archives moved into the small back room in the next WL Building at 28 Gertrude Street Fitzroy, diagonally opposite Shrew Women's Bookshop. All the collectives combined to organise the Women's Summer Ball in December at the San Remo Ballroom, which successfully raised enough money to cover all the WL Building's expenses for the following year.

For the next three years the Archives continued receiving donations, made the collection accessible for students and, along with the other collectives, helped to organise the Women's Summer and Winter Balls twice a year to keep the WL Building open. Unfortunately, owing to lack of interest and dwindling finances, the WL Building closed down in June 1992.

Renamed the Women's Liberation and Lesbian Archives to recognise lesbian activists

At that point, with nowhere else to go, all 90 donations moved into my house on a temporary basis where they were stored in two rooms for the next eight years. I decided, as I was the last member of the collective still standing, to add the word 'lesbian' to the title, making it the Women's Liberation and Lesbian Archives.

The reason I did this was to pay tribute to all the lesbian feminists who had played an integral part in the WLM. During the 1970s and 1980s, whether it was activist collectives or demonstrations, you name it, one lesbian or a dozen were actively engaged and influential

in whatever political action that was being taken. Even if it didn't affect lesbians directly, we were politically committed to the liberation of all womyn from oppression. Even so, let's not forget the impact that lesbian-specific groups such as DOB/ALM, Radicalesbians, Lynx, Lesbian Action Group, Lesbian Mothers Bridge the Gap Forum and the *Lesbian Newsletter*, had on WLM politics culminating in a plethora of lesbian festivals and conferences in every state during the 1990s and into the new millennium.

The common belief that the WLM was mainly made up of middle-class womyn was simply not true here in Victoria. In my experience, the WLM in Victoria was a predominantly working-class, radical lesbian feminist, socialist feminist revolutionary movement which prided itself on making lesbian and womyn's voices heard and demanded that our rights be recognised.

When I studied the list of contributors recently, out of the 156 contributions we have to date, 78 of those are from lesbians I know personally from our political work at the feminist barricades, and there were 58 groups that were either lesbian groups or had lesbian members. By its very presence, the VWLLFA recognises and pays tribute to the enormous contribution that lesbian activists have made to the WLM as a whole.

Racism in the WLM

On the other hand, during the 1970s and into the 1980s, the WLM in Victoria did not have a good track record as far as feminist anti-racism work was concerned. Pat O'Shane, the first indigenous Australian to qualify as a lawyer, had this to say about the WLM in 1976:

The problem of racism is one that all women in the women's movement must start to come to terms with. There is no doubt in my mind that racism is expressed by women in the movement. Its roots are many and they go deep.²

Since then, we non-Aboriginal feminists have become slightly less ignorant and a tad more aware, as is evidenced by more recent donations to the VWLLFA such as the Aboriginal Rights Solidarity Group papers and the Koorie Heritage Trust documents.

The Victorian Women's Liberation and Lesbian Feminist Archives Inc moves into the University of Melbourne Archives

During those eight years the Archives were at my place, it was even easier for me to work on the Archives and make them accessible for research by PhD students and for writing books, like *Getting Equal* by Marilyn Lake.³ However, after I'd been to see the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn during a visit to New York in the USA in 1999, I returned to Melbourne inspired. I called a meeting and during the year 2000, a dedicated group of lesbians worked on incorporating the Archives with a change of name to the Victorian Women's Liberation and Lesbian Feminist Archives Inc, and we decided to move the VWLLFA collection to the University of Melbourne Archives (UMA), where all our documents and memorabilia have been stored ever since.

Having the VWLLFA at UMA has proved to be a fruitful collaboration. Not only is this precious material being safely stored in temperature-controlled conditions, but the VWLLFA still maintains a custodian role. New donations are still being received, old ones are being added to, and the ongoing archival work continues to be done by VWLLFA volunteers. Over the past 17 years, we have been busy sorting new donations, applying for grants

to buy acid-free materials, photographing and archiving tee-shirts, banners and badges, listing the material for online access, organising the lesbian and feminist periodicals to be bound, indexing photos, storing posters and boxing memorabilia including the textile components, like a clown costume from the Performing Older Women's Circus, items from the Cockburn Sound Action in WA in 1984 and a Radclyffe Runners softball outfit and bat. More information can be found on the website: <http://www.vwllfa.org.au>

Even so, I no longer have to be on hand to make sure a student can use the collection because it can be accessed for research during business hours through the Reading Room at the Baillieu Library, a very convenient arrangement. We are also very appreciative of UMA's information technology expertise and the effort the workers at UMA have gone to, to ensure that appropriate items from the VWLLFA collection are included in various exhibitions. And I have particularly enjoyed the friendly discussions over a cuppa in the tearoom.

Conclusion

I am very grateful to the WLM because it saved my life by giving me a political purpose, a feminist framework and a radical lesbian feminist community of like-minded and politically oriented lesbians to keep me active and sane. And not least, my longest relationship: 34 years and counting with the VWLLFA, which documents almost 50 years of Victoria's small part in one of the most significant political movements for revolutionary change the world has ever seen.

Endnotes

1. In this article the spelling 'womyn' is used to refer to both women and woman as a feminist alternative to being defined in reference to men. The word herstory is in common usage amongst some radical feminists to give a feminist alternative to the word history.
2. Pat O'Shane, 'Is There Any Relevance in the Women's Movement for Aboriginal Women?', *Refractory Girl: A Women's Studies Journal*, no. 12, September 1976.
3. Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1999.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Jean Taylor is a radical lesbian feminist writer and political activist based on Wurundjeri country in Melbourne Australia. Her latest books are *Brazen Hussies Stroppdykes* and *Lesbians Ignite!*, which together make up *The Archives Trilogy*, which documents lesbian feminist radical activism in the WLM in Victoria, Australia during the years 1969–99. More of Jean's work is included on the Dyke Books Inc website: <http://www.dykebooks.com>