

## WOMEN IN AUSTRALIA'S ARCHIVES

### 1. Women in Australian Society

Janet Reed and Kathleen Oakes, *Women in Australian Society, 1901-45: A guide to the holdings of Australian Archives relating to women, 1901-45*. Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1977.

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Reviewed by BAIBA IRVING

*Women in Australian Society* is a comprehensive listing of Australian Federal Government Record Series which are especially relevant to understanding the history of women in Australia from 1901 to 1945 and which are held in the Australian Capital Territory, Victorian and New South Wales branches of the Australian Archives.

The authors, like many contemporary researchers, interpret 'women's history' broadly and treat women as participants in the total life of the society rather than focussing on women's role as wives and mothers. Thus, they deal not only with women as homemakers but also with women's activities in the areas of work, health, education, law and politics, with aboriginal and migrant women, with women in the external territories, and with individual women of distinction or notoriety (e.g., Queen Emma, Elizabeth Kenny, Adela Pankhurst Walsh and Mabel Freer). The guide itself is arranged by subject, each chapter concentrating on one of the above aspects of Australian women's history. The chapter introductions explain what Federal Government activities have been relevant to particular topics and provide a broad outline of the documentary information in Australian Archives about those activities. The main body of each chapter contains descriptive listings, arranged by government department, of the series relevant to the subject of the chapter.

Janet Reed and Kathy Oakes must be complimented on the excellent guide which they have prepared. It is obvious that they have a thorough and perceptive understanding of the records and that they have judiciously selected the series to be included in each chapter. They demonstrate clearly that comprehensive and carefully compiled subject guides are an important type of archival finding aid for which guides arranged according to provenance (e.g., primarily by record group or record series) cannot provide a substitute. There are a few faults in *Women in Australian Society*. Some series have no descriptions while some of the series descriptions are too brief or too cryptic for their relevance to be apparent from the guide itself. Furthermore, the lack of an index is very regrettable. Nevertheless, the guide is well set out, the chapter introductions and series descriptions are concise and informative, the coverage of the records appears to be comprehensive for each subject and the record series and items selected for inclusion are interesting, often unexpected, and always relevant.

As well as being a valuable addition to the growing number of Australian archival finding aids, *Women in Australian Society* is an important contribution to the study of women's history in Australia.

In the last five years there has been much valuable research on this topic: not only has this research been empirically and theoretically interesting but also it has provoked questioning of basic and traditionally accepted beliefs about the history of this country. Most of the published work in this field to date is not based on Federal or State Government archival sources. However, since the beginning of white settlement in 1788, the State has always played an extremely important role in the lives of Australian citizens, both women and men. It is therefore inevitable that researchers interested in the history of women in Australia have begun to turn to government archives for essential source material. *Women in Australian Society* will invaluablely facilitate and hasten the progress of research on Australian Archives sources and thereby enrich our knowledge and understanding of the history of women in Australia.

By way of a postscript, it is necessary to mention that *Women in Australian Society* provides a useful general introduction to the record holdings of the Australian Archives. It will undoubtedly stimulate an interest which Australian Archives might well consider meeting by preparing other finding aids for publication.

## 2. Women in Australia

Kay Daniels, Mary Murnane and Anne Picot (eds.), *Women in Australia, An Annotated Guide to Records*. 2 volumes. Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1977.

Reviewed by MARGARET JENNINGS

This work is intriguing. While ostensibly a guide to record holdings, its summaries of the different types of records give one a wealth of information and as such briefly outline the status accorded women in colonial and modern Australia. However, any listing of this type is only as good as the sources it can tap, and what we, as archivists, can provide. Given the imperfect state of documentation in many institutions and the lack of published finding aids, this work is a tribute to its editors and researchers.

Various sources, both public and private, have been explored throughout Australia—the Australian Archives being omitted as part of a separate study. The *Guide* does not attempt to be exhaustive, but ranges over government files and reports, union and association holdings, private collections of correspondence and journals. One striking factor is the volume of records that have survived from many women's societies and unions and are now in the major libraries and archives. The diversity of the sources leads one also to question what should be available, but as yet remains in private hands, areas for further research and, unhappily, what has evidently been destroyed.

The primary arrangement of the *Guide* is by State and within this by custodian—State archives offices heading the lists, followed by other major institutions, associations and private collections. An introductory note to each State archives is provided and comments on three major aspects: published guides, indexes available and

conditions regulating access. In general terms, archivists did not come out of this at all well. Most public institutions have no general guide to holdings, though some have guides covering specific records, such as immigration, or aborigines. A reflection on the differing terminology in use, is that while the Western Australian State archives has no published guide,<sup>1</sup> it does have 'Archival Notes'—referred to as 'excellent'. Indexes in all institutions are available though it would probably be archival carping to wonder whether they are the original departmental/agency indexes and registers or those constructed by archivists. Both types are mentioned, but not elaborated upon in all instances.

Access conditions for State records waiver between 'open', thirty years, fifty years, a proposed sixty-five years embargo (for some Queensland records)<sup>2</sup>, restricted, and individual application for access. Private papers generally need approval or are individually categorised re access. Australia may be trailing some less restrictive overseas policies on access, and it is accepted, perhaps too passively, that each institution shall formulate its own policy to satisfy its client departments or agencies, 'protect' its citizens and generally frustrate contemporary and, in some cases, historic research. Tasmania, for example, has 'the usual thirty years embargo on State records',<sup>3</sup> although convict records are an exception and permission to use them must be sought from the Library Board—'genuine researchers' having no difficulty. New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland (the latter two opting for a fifty year embargo with exceptions) illustrate the dilemma for a researcher in seeking access via departmental approval, with the ever recurring doubt about how accurate one's conclusions are where material is withheld, and where access policies are not spelt out. Currently there is not much redress for a thwarted researcher, and archivists are equally remiss in remonstrating against existing policies.

Once into the individual entries for each agency, one is absorbed by the information presented. Some cases have evidently singled themselves out—or have perhaps been chosen—as examples of an attitude which most would hope banished from contemporary Australia. Unfortunately, it isn't the case. In a (mostly) dispassionate manner, the contributors allow the records to speak for themselves, and in so doing bring out the patronising hypocrisy of various administrations and 'welfare officers', the so-called benevolence of women and agencies towards the less privileged, and the double standard of morality pervading Australian society. That the economic role of women in colonial society has yet to be assessed is well demonstrated. Equally awaiting evaluation is 'female pauperism' and the attendant growth of charitable institutions. This links in with the general economic trends of unemployment or local structural change. It is interesting to note that the editor, Kay Daniels, ascribes this partly 'to the great Australian male habit of wife desertion'.<sup>4</sup>

Countering an historic imbalance may well appear futile, but these two volumes offer a great deal towards just that. One cannot dismiss emotive subjects such as treatment of convicts, prostitution, immigration—and what a 'woman's role' was seen to be, with tones overlapping

into today. Women were accorded a role, some a status, and it is in the illustration of both themes that such works as this educate and prompt a re-evaluation of the position of women in Australian society.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Information based solely on data contained in *Women in Australia*.
2. Volume 2, p.1.
3. *Ibid.*, Volume 1, p.1.
4. *Ibid.*, Volume 1, p. xiii.