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Ordinary Women Extraordinary Lives Launch  
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What is to be done? This wonderful, path-breaking exhibition – Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Lives – provides some suggestions of the way forward.

The extraordinary range of women represented here and their important, productive, transformative contribution to shaping and sustaining our society raises really important questions about the writing of history.

As I suggest in the introduction to the catalogue, their stories raise fundamental questions about the categories and conceptual frameworks traditionally employed by historians. How adequate can they be if they fail to incorporate the record of women's creative endeavour so richly documented, here, in this exhibition?

Perhaps it is the very complexity of women's experience that defies the easy categorisations and distinctions – for example, between public and private, local and national, production and reproduction – on which traditional histories often rest? In reading about these 'ordinary' women one quickly realises how artificial such distinctions really are in real life.

During the late 1980s, it gave me great pleasure to serve on the Council of the Museum of Victoria, during which time we hosted some excellent exhibitions (and we were visited by Diana and Charles!). But it is a rare thing for museum exhibitions to provoke new thinking, as well as reflect on well-grounded research.

This exhibition – Ordinary Women, extraordinary Lives – is exciting, I think, because it poses significant conceptual challenges – how should we understand the complexity of women's lives historically? How should we understand the relationship of civil society to political movements? How do we write women into Victorian and national history?

Finally, I want to suggest that the exhibition raises these questions so effectively, because it is creatively produced; it provides aesthetic pleasure and new perspectives on the past and stimulates real curiosity and emotional responses. With its diverse installations, it shows us that there are many effective ways of staging historical interventions. I am greatly honoured to be associated with the exhibition and hope you relish it as I do.