

Speech by the Hon Joan Kirner at the Victorian Women's Trust

June 2nd 2009 in launching

Beyond the Garden Gate:

Local insight into the Victorian female suffrage movement

by Joanna Fitch

Thank you very much for your welcome. It's a pleasure to be here and to participate again in the work of the Women's Trust.

I thought one of the best things the Cain Government ever did was set up the Victorian Women's Trust. It was very interesting when we set it up, because there were all sorts of bids going in for Victoria's 150th celebrations, and most of them were about buildings. "We'll build this, we'll build that, we'll have a sculpture to honour women..." and I thought "No way!"

Now there were a few of us around who knew a little bit about community development and certainly lots about funding for things that women on the ground wanted to do. So with pressure from a number of people, we agreed that it would be an investment fund, and the investment concept was important because it was an investment in women and it was something that was meant to build as the years went on. And then with Dur-e Dara, Mary Crooks and others arriving on the scene, the concept was very clearly taken up and they ran with it, they knew it was necessary and that some important things were going to happen.

I would just like to congratulate you all on the fantastic work you've done in building the Women's Trust, building women's contributions to the Trust, and in helping individual women and groups of women to build their confidence. And Jo (Joanna Fitch), I think this fascinating work is right in that framework. One of the things Rose Scott, the NSW suffragists said was "We need to record women's history, because men's history is often recorded, but often the good that women do is interred with their bones".

Before I say anything more, I'd like to pay tribute to the Women's Trust, and the Fitch family who are all here. I'd also like to acknowledge those coordinating this event and in particular to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people as the traditional custodians of this land.

In opening the book - and first of all, it's a wonderful cover, so I congratulate whoever designed the cover. Secondly, it's beautifully presented. Thirdly, it's got what my predecessors would call the "Wow" factor. So many histories just do not have the "Wow" factor.

One of the first "Wow" factors is the quotes. I've got them underlined everywhere from the very first quote by Mrs Langdale, the council member for Victorian Women's Franchise League, when she was speaking to the Hawthorn branch of the Australian Natives Association in 1895. It's a very important quote from the many speeches she made and I found it quite fantastic -

"a hundred years hence the people will wonder how such one-sided legislation could have lasted so long... and the men who are now contending for the retention of the system will in a few years be ashamed to own which side they were on."

And that's another part of the "Wow" factor, because we're so used to hearing about Vida Goldstein and one of my favourites, Henrietta Dugdale, that you just don't realise how many women were great orators at the time. As you know, I've been in Parliament and I've known many women who are nervous about speaking publicly, so I hope they read this book and get some courage. By talking about what you feel strongly about, anyone can be a good orator.

The proposal for this book was to ensure that the activities and contributions of women, other than those who are usually quoted in the suffrage struggle, the women on the ground as I call them, are recognised and recorded. In the case studies we can see that Jo Fitch has done a wonderful job of providing insight into their activities, women in St Kilda, women in Bairnsdale, women in Hawthorn, women in Casterton, women in Maryborough which I love, and women in Colac.

And at the back of the book - and thank you for this - there is a list of the towns, and the number of signatories to the Monster Petition. This is the important record that Jo has based her work around and what many of us, including the Office of Women's Policy have used as the basis in celebrating the centenary of the suffrage struggle and victory. The Monster Petition was broken down into local areas and made accessible through the work of the Public Record Office. They have done a wonderful job to connect the records, so that thousands of women across Victoria have discovered the Petition, found their forebears names and joined in suffrage celebrations. It's very important for our history to connect our past history with our future direction and Jo has picked this up and brought it to light. You have to handle the petition with white gloves, by the way - and that's a good thing as we don't want it to fall to pieces.

So I'm excited to be here as I said, for several reasons. The first one is my passion for the history of the long struggle for the adult suffrage legislation to be passed in Parliament. It's important to remember that women were never *given* the vote, women won the vote. So if you're ever writing history, don't use the term *women were given the vote*. Women won the vote through the struggles in Jo's book as well as many more.

If you read, or rather when you read, "*Beyond the Garden Gate*" you will see that Jo also touches on the tactics that were used. I love a book about tactics because we always need tactics and strategies to change things and these were the tactics that kept the women going. The book is full of the tactics and strategies, it's full of home meetings, full of public meetings, it's full of letters to the editor and it's full of networking. The Petition and vote could not have been achieved without networking. It's got a power of work in it, Jo - it must have been a tremendous amount of work, because you dig behind the digging. I love that about it. You actually do what one of my heroes in history, Graeme Davison said, and you quote him -

"History is written in the elusive space between what we can find and what we can imagine." I think you've filled part of that space beautifully, because I think all of us interested in suffrage have tried to imagine the lives of these women.

I'm also interested in the role of the media of the time, in usually not reporting issues important to women and you trace that through the work. The deadly silence from the media - not the Age and Argus, but the local and suburban media. They'd record what's happening in Melbourne but not what was being said by the local women. Absolutely fascinating and what's changed?

I've already mentioned some of the gems of the debate, but there's also Mrs Nichols from Colac, you've got to read her speech quotes, she's absolutely fantastic. I'm told there were 46 suffrage meetings held in Colac in 1895. I couldn't believe it and of course not one of them was recorded in the newspaper.

Another aspect that I'm fascinated by was the births, the number of children women had and lost. I did a quick count of one of the case studies, I think it was in Casterton where the average number of children that women who signed the Petition had in one or two streets was 10. How did they ever have time to sign the petition?

The other striking thing for me, and there were many more that I could mention, was the use of pseudonyms because some women couldn't use their name in public. Pseudonyms by the 'doctor's wife', letters signed 'a Victorian woman', how strange that it's come true again in the whole refugee context.

The other fascinating part of the book, as you would expect from my interest in history and politics, was the issue of class background. So many historians try to write class out of history. But many good ones write it in. Not as the only issue, but the central issue. And what was fascinating was the different actions from the different classes of women. I knew this already but I saw it better illustrated in Jo's work.

There were the women in Hawthorn, which is really what you'd call a residential part of Melbourne, and they were women who were into social action, or social welfare you might call it. The benevolent societies were very important and needed, because the Petition was in 1891 and it was the early years of the depression. It didn't seem to be affecting Hawthorn as much as in more industrial place like St Kilda. This group of women were better off, not necessarily in their own right, but some of them in their own right and some of them in their husbands' right. But whatever their class, it was clear that they had the independence to say "I'm not just doing benevolence, I'm doing power." Benevolence is important, but having and using power is a lot more effective.

On the other hand, there were all the women who were workers in their own right, nurses such as Nurse Cox, carers and teachers. Then there were women who were married to tradesmen. Boot-makers were everywhere. Saddlers and all that leather work. I know where the leather was made and it's still made out in the West today. The case study that really intrigued me was Maryborough, because that's where the advocacy of the women whose husbands were miners came out very clearly, because the mining industry was in decline, and they were really being hurt by its impact.

So they did information sharing, they did education, they did oratory, they did advocacy, they did social welfare, they held home meetings, they wrote letters to the Premier - some of you are still doing that - and they did door knocking. And they had great networks. And they succeeded.

Jo, I'm delighted with your research and all the work you have done. One comment I'll make and I think you say this too, is that there's more work to do. This is always the case when a good history is written and in part this is the result of the work of people like Weston Bate, who is in the audience, they push you in other directions to find out more - now what ifwhat would.....?

Thank you Jo for your fascinating account of the story behind the story in the struggle for women's suffrage and its key political weapon - the Monster Petition. And thank you to the Victorian Women's Trust for giving me the opportunity to launch "*Beyond the Garden Gate*" and to help contribute to the important work that you are all doing.

And to finish I think it best to quote some of the rallying words of the Women's Anthem - Love and Justice by Kavisha Mazzella.

"I'll live my truth what ever comes,

So many rivers to cross till our journeys done....

All who toil the weary earth see beyond your measure

Women are the real gold for all of us to treasure

For every heroine that's named there are a thousand nameless

Who live to make a better day with acts of love and justice."

Thank you and congratulations on a fine piece of work.

Joan Kirner

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Edited by Anne Paul