

LIVES OBSCURELY GREAT

*edited by
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'Lives Obscurely Great' which was published towards the end of 1980, is a composite book written by a number of women writers of New South Wales about another group of women of New South Wales, women who were all unsung heroines in days gone by.

The book was published under the auspices of The Society of Women Writers (Australia), New South Wales Branch, assisted by a grant from the New South Wales Division of Cultural Activities; the theme is basically women of the 19th century who contributed to life in New South Wales.

In form, the book falls into three periods — early, middle and latter — and although it is a series of historical essays about women in the 19th century, logically it flows over into earlier times with the foundation of the Colony, and into the 20th century in the last six chapters.

Originally, the title chosen to bind this highly varied series of essays was 'Half the Sky'; however, when it was discovered that this title had already been used for another book, the quotation 'Lives Obscurely Great' from Sir Henty Newbolt, was adopted.

As Dame Alexandra Hasluck says in her foreword, the title of the book is surely one of the triumphs because it "fascinates by its contradiction in terms". Many of those 19th century women could match their men in courage and adventure, but so little has hitherto been written about them that the importance of their lives has been overshadowed. In some measure, the present volume brings to light their contribution to our heritage.

The chapters vary greatly, not only in their style and subject matter, but also in the amount of documented evidence available to substantiate them. In some cases, all that is known of the character in question has been handed down through family anecdotes or recollections.

Two chapters which reflect the variety in this book are entitled 'An Aboriginal Girl's Devotion' — George Clark and the Kamilaroi Tribe, and 'Types and Stereotypes' — Some Reflections on the Independence of Middle Class Girls and Women in New South Wales 1880-1910

The former essay in the 'early period' of the book is an almost fairytale beautiful love story, without the happy ending. It tells of an Aboriginal girl's devotion to an escaped convict, George Clarke. Although her name is not known, there is evidence that when he escaped from his employer in the 1820's, she rescued him from exhaustion and starvation and led him to her tribe (camped near present day Boggabri) where he lived peacefully for the next five years. Events then became more dramatic and finally, in 1835, George was publicly hanged at the age of 29. Throughout the vicissitudes of his short life after his meeting with the young Aboriginal girl, she was never far from his mind.

By contrast, the chapter 'Types and Stereotypes' has involved a vast amount of research and the author is able to support the somewhat surprising conclusion that middle class women in the period stipulated

“chose to take full advantage of the contemporary belief that they were morally and spiritually superior to men”.

As already stressed, there is much variety in the subject matter, but a common theme which pervades overall with regard to the pioneer women, is that of a mother of a large family — 10 or 12 children is not uncommon and one chapter is devoted to the mother of 18 — as well as helpmate in an unfriendly environment, with barely the basic necessities of life to sustain the family. When such a woman is a widow and still manages to contribute to the general good of the community, she must surely be regarded as ‘great’. Such a woman was Elizabeth Mitchell, who has been termed the ‘Mother of Albury’. The mother of 11 children, Elizabeth Mitchell was widowed at the age of 40. In 1836, her brother gave her the Mungabareena Run, which had been established in the bushflats of the Hume (later the Murray) River. She left her home in the Goulburn district and piled her possessions and her children on a bullock dray and headed south. All her stores were brought in from Sydney, her nearest Post Office was at Yass, 290 kilometres away; but nevertheless, she managed to supervise the running of her property and the education of her children. She was literally the first permanent resident of the town of Albury and her descendants were influential in the development of the entire Upper Murray.

Perhaps one of the most interesting chapters in the book from an ethnic point of view is also set in the Albury district. It is entitled ‘Far From the Fatherland’ — German Women and Their Families in N.S.W. This is a very informative and descriptive account of the German settlers who came to Dights Forest 16 kilometres north of Albury in 1868, and how the community grew and spread its influence in such ‘neat orderly towns’ as Walla and Culcairn.

In contrast to the pioneer women with large families, one chapter in the later period gives an excellent account of a single lady, Miss Lucy Osburn, who at the age of 32 arrived in Sydney in 1868 with five English nursing sisters to take up the position of Lady Superintendent of the Sydney Infirmary. Conditions at the hospital were incredibly squalid and she battled with the authorities to improve the lot of both the patients and the nurses. To Lucy Osburn must go the credit for transforming nursing methods, and by the time she had returned to England she had established her profession on a solid basis of “high ideals and practical expertise”.

Towards the very end of the book is the chapter by Lysbeth Cohen entitled ‘Beginning with Esther’ — Some Distinguished Jewish Women of N.S.W. Indeed, this chapter is the abbreviated form of the excellent article which appears in this Journal of the Australian Jewish Historical Society.

As it stands in the book under review, this essay can only highlight the lives of the six Jewish women selected, because of the word limit for each chapter.

However, even in this abbreviated version there is no doubt that the women selected are of outstanding calibre and have contributed greatly to life in New South Wales. If one special quality in these women can be pinpointed, perhaps it is that intellectual perception which one tends to associate with more recent times and the era of women’s liberation. The six

women selected were all born in the 19th century (and interestingly, two of them were born in country towns) but their work was in the 20th century. Each of them — Mirrie Hill, Ruby Rich-Shalit, Gladys Marks, Fanny Cohen, Zoe Benjamin and Dr. Fanny Reading — is gifted with an extraordinary intellect, coupled with great sensitivity and concern for other people and their contribution to life in New South Wales has been truly outstanding.

This review has alluded to only seven of the 29 chapters in 'Lives Obscurely Great'. All are of historical interest and the humorous newspaper cuttings which are interspersed between the essays further enhance the historical relevance of the entire publication.

Anne Andgel