

2016: Anne Summers' *Damned Whores and God's Police* 4th edition launch 16 September 2016

It's not often indeed it's very rare, for a 4th edition of any book on Australia to appear. And for a book that addresses the condition of women in Australia, well, it's unheard of. It's probably a first.

Anne Summers however, is used to being the first. She has been smashing boundaries and glass ceilings for more than 40 years now so it's not surprising that she should smash another with the 4th edition of the most influential book ever published on Australian women.

And what a door stopper the book now is !!! Look at it now in comparison with the extremely modest first edition forty years ago in 1975! This book has made such a profound impact on two generations of Australian women, that it's impossible to imagine our lives without it. So the publication of the 4th edition is not just a milestone Australian women it's a triumph for Australian feminism! The 40th anniversary of the book's first appearance was celebrated last year with an amazing conference at UTS, attended by many of us here today. But what I felt was missing from that extraordinary event, was the story of the origins of *Damned Whores and God's Police*, how it first saw the light of day and how it continues to be so powerful and influential today.

SYDNEY 1975

I would like to take us back to Sydney in the early 1970s and zone in on the federation style house at Number 5 Piper Street North in in the suburb of Annandale, in Sydney's inner west. The owners had rented the house to me in 1971. Anne Summers and her then partner, Paul Blackett, arrived in 1972. Anne and I were postgraduates at different universities each researching what would become the books for which we are best known: *Damned Whores and God's Police* and in my case, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*.

Each of us had a similar purpose.

We were trying to overturn long held myths and stereotypes about white women and Aborigines. I was arguing that despite apparent evidence to the

contrary, the Tasmanian Aborigines were not destined to die out and had not died out in 1876 or at any other time in history, but had survived into the present and were now demanding the return of the rights and recognition as a distinct people. Anne was challenging the historical stereotype of white Australian women as either sexually promiscuous sluts or moralising do gooders. Rather they were agents of their own destiny and were claiming the right to engage in the world on their own terms, including reproductive rights, equal pay, child care, and freedom from sexual violence. The ideas and beliefs that underpinned our research were drawn from the same views, that sexism and racism had emerged from the same belief systems and we were determined to overturn all of them.

What was it about 5 Piper Street North that enabled us to produce our path breaking books?

First, each of us had a study, rooms of our own so to speak, while our male partners worked at desks in the dining room or even on the dining room table. Anne's room was upstairs in the attic. Mine was attached to the bedroom. So each morning we could each close our respective study doors and retreat into our own mental space. As a communal household, our male partners also shared the cooking and housework, and they certainly took our work seriously.

Secondly, we were not brand new university graduates, embarking on postgraduate work. Rather we were in our late twenties with considerable work experience behind us. Anne had worked her way through her undergraduate degree at the University of Adelaide learning to be a journalist. She already had a reputation as a journalist and was now further honing her skills as the editor of *Refractory Girl*. So, Anne was already trained up in meeting deadlines. I had been a high school teacher and research assistant to Manning Clark, Australia's premier historian. So I had considerable training in archival research practices and techniques and completed a masters qualifying thesis on the history of the Sydney Opera House then nearing completion. Nor had we been assigned to our postgraduate research topics by our supervisors as is often the case today. Rather we had formulated our research topics from our own experiences and we had to convince our supervisors to take them on board.

Thirdly, we were also part of a new generation of graduates who were among the first in their family to complete a university education and working in professional areas such as journalism and teaching where women expected to receive equal pay. For us there was no question that we would ever accept a lesser salary than a man in the same job.

Finally, we were not in long term relationships. At the very age when most Australian women were married and bearing children, we were full time postgraduates on scholarships writing books. So we had economic and social freedom that few Australian women of our generation enjoyed. It also set us apart from our forbears in that we were enabled to engage with the world full-time as writers, thinkers and activists.

Every day we made the personal into the political. It was central to our personal relations, in our research and writing, in housework, in consciousness raising groups, and in starting journals like *mejane and Refractory Girl*. It was an energising time and of course we dressed for the part. I well remember the day Anne came home with the hairstyle you can see on the front cover of the 4th edition, photographed so perceptively by Carol Jerrems. Known then as the lion style, it seemed to empower Anne in new ways. The aviator glasses and dungarees completed the revolutionary style. My partner Warren Osmond and I wore same sex clothes and sported similar hairstyles, which was a shorter version of Anne's lion cut. We presented a new and threatening appearance to many of the men that we knew.

As revolutionaries we were confident we could change the world. And we were in a great hurry to make it happen. We felt we were part of an international movement of women's liberation and that Piper Street North was one the nerve centres of the movement in Sydney. Our lives were dominated by daily debates about the politics of housework, childcare, domestic violence, women's reproductive rights and political representation. It was up to us to make things happen.

Then one Sunday afternoon, during a long weekend, the outside world entered Piper Street North in a more startling way. A young woman leapt over our back fence into our garden seeking refuge from her husband who was threatening her with a carving knife and terrified that he would kill their little

boy she had left behind. Somehow, the little boy aged about 4 was rescued and we were gradually brought into a new reality. We were horrified to find that the little boy was so traumatised by his father that he had never learned to speak. It was this incident that led Anne to initiate the group that would start Elsie Women's Refuge while I became part of the collective that would start Leichhardt Women's Community Health Centre.

This sense of urgency is a hall mark of the first edition of *Damned Whores and God's Police*. It's important to remember there were few other serious books about Australian women in print at the time. A decade earlier in 1962, the British social scientist Noman McKenzie had produced *Women in Australia* where he blamed women for not engaging in public life. The only book that explored the experiences of women in the early colony at Sydney, was in Eleanor Dark's historical novel, *The Timeless Land*. Even so, most of the key female characters and the leading convict woman in particular, were entirely invented. The historical sources it seems to us, completely ignored women.

However, the apparent absence of women from Australian history was partly overcome in the early 1970s when Anne started her book, with the republication of several journals of the officers from the First Fleet – including Ralph Clark, the surgeon John White, lieutenant Philip Gidley King and the judge advocate David Collins. A careful reading of their journals however, revealed their sneering attitudes towards convict women, even though they took these very women as their mistresses who in turn bore them children. Anne found that Ann Yeats was the convict woman who lived with the Judge Advocate David Collins and bore him two children. But it was much harder to track down the name of the convict woman who lived with Ralph Clark the man who coined the infamous term: 'damned whores' when the second fleet arrived in 1790. Anne was intrigued the underside of these men's lives however was barely acknowledged in the official documents like governors' despatches and the colony's newspaper the *Sydney Gazette*, yet it was the reality of their daily lives. It was the journals that gave Anne insights into the male double standard and enabled her to construct the damned whores and god's police dichotomy which continued to prevail in 20th century Australia. The Mitchell Library of course, became Anne's second home as she spent months searching for information about Australian women. Many of the

women librarians were only too pleased to share their unsurpassed knowledge of the archival sources and drew out attention to sources that we didn't know existed.

The further that Anne researched the story of white women's historical experiences, the more she found that Australian male historians had reinforced the dual stereotype of women. Indeed one very prominent historian had dismissed the women's suffrage movement in Australia on the grounds that, in comparison with their sisters in the UK, Australian women had never struggled for the vote and that Australian men had given it to them on a platter. But when Anne read the suffrage debates and the forty year campaign to achieve women's suffrage in Australia a very different story emerged. In Victoria for example, men in the Legislative Council, fought for twenty years to prevent women from gaining the vote, and it would be another six decades before the first woman was elected to that august body. The comment made only last week by former Prime Minister John Howard, justifying the paucity of Liberal women in the federal parliament on the grounds of their childrearing responsibilities, indicates that the idea of women in public life is still a great threat to some sectors of the community. I am always surprised that the quality of our male MPs is never considered.

Contesting patriarchal stereotypes by searching for their origins historically became a major project for Anne.

The only other book about Australian women which was enormously influential at the time was Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, first published in 1971. Germaine visited Sydney in 1972 to promote the book and the sexist media coverage she received, including the refusal by the *Sydney Morning Herald* to report on a her speech at a major event at the Sydney Town Hall, made us realise that a book about the history of Australian women was sorely needed. That fact alone I think gave Anne the necessary boost to believe that she could write a book about the history of Australian women for a wide Australian readership.

Let's consider the issues that Anne foregrounded in her book. She began by introducing us to Rebekah Small, the first white woman born in Australia. She married at the age of 18, bore 14 children and died at the age of 95. Beyond

that, Rebekah remains unknown to historians. Anne used this fragmentary knowledge to establish a framework to begin what she called the process of 'reversing the lack of comprehension' about the history of Australian women. As she pointed out, 'we cannot begin to understand the position of women today, just by amassing statistics' about them. Rather we need to consider the attitudes towards them in the past and how they have changed over time. To this end she deployed an interdisciplinary approach, using the techniques of history, sociology, literature, psychology and medicine and the styles of history and journalism to argue that 'women in Australia are forced to eke out a precarious psychic and physical existence within a society that has denied them cultural potency and economic independence and hence has prevented them from constructing their own identities or from having more than a very restricted choice about what they can do with their lives.'(pp.102-3) This ideological form of Australian sexism derived from a particularly rigid dualistic notion of women as damned whores or gods police that began with the First Fleet and continued with variations to the present. The stereotypes ranged from the 'damned whores' identified by Ralph Clark in the Second Fleet, Caroline Chisholm promoting marriage and family in the 1840s, the emergence of the new woman in white collar work at the end of the nineteenth century to the emergence of the nuclear family and the long struggle for equal pay and sexual freedom in the twentieth century.

Much of the book focussed on the experiences of women in the 1960s and 1970s – chapter 3, 'the Sporting Wife' still sends shivers down my spine today, in that it remains one of the most insightful analyses of domestic violence I have ever read. It also remains one of the most compelling studies of how Australian women were sidelined as the "other" in white male consciousness. Forty years later, the chapter still has much to tell us about gender relations in Australia. The final chapter "prospects for liberation", set out the future: women should learn to work together and trust each other, ; to value women and take them seriously; to demand policies that enable women to access tertiary education, childcare, abortion, equal pay, and women's refuges.

Damned Whores and God Police is a bold, big picture manifesto for change and it resonated with millions of Australian women. Here was a book that articulated their experiences, frustrations and unconscious fears and showed

how they could be changed. Many thousands of women took action and did so. The dramatic increase in women completing tertiary education alone, is simply one aspect of that dramatic change. The 1980s saw the introduction of the sex discrimination act, along with affirmative action, paid parental leave, and the extension of equal pay, the opening up of new areas of employment and careers for women. Anne herself has played a critical role in enabling so many of these important changes to happen. But they never would have happened with *Damned Whores and Gods Police*.

But as this new edition reminds us, there is still much to do. The key underlying issue that constricted and contained women since 1788 is as oppressive today as it was then - I mean of course, the issue of domestic violence. How is it that the punching of two boys in Kings Cross that led to their deaths, led to a dramatic change in Sydney's drinking laws, whereas the death of at least one woman each week from domestic violence, raises barely a ripple on the media radar? The young woman who jumped over our back fence in Piper Street in Annandale in 1974, still has no real guarantee of safety from domestic violence in 2016. Women's refuges were dramatically stripped of funding in 2014 and but for Rose Batty becoming Australian of the Year in 2015 and making domestic violence a national issue, they would barely exist today. Yet as Rose Batty so eloquently and passionately pointed out, the need for women's refuges today is greater than ever before.

For this reason alone, the 4th edition of *Damned Whores and Gods Police* is as relevant today as the first edition in 1975. Of all the histories of Australian women since 1975 it remains the most engaging and politically savvy. Indeed it continues its vital role as the manifesto for change. It gives me enormous pleasure to launch the 4th edition of this absolutely fabulous book.

