

A history of the Australian Women's Studies Association:

Drawing on documents collected by Lyndall Ryan from 1989 to 1998, and from a short history she wrote.

Chilla Bulbeck, August 2006

The idea for the Australian Women's Studies Association arose from similar associations established in the United States (the National Women's Studies Association), in New Zealand (volume 9 of the Women's Studies Association (NZ) Newsletter was published in 1987 and 1988, suggesting the associating was at least ten years old when AWSA was formed) and Canada.

In November 1987, Lyndall Ryan, then reader in the women's studies unit at Flinders University sent a letter to all women's studies unit convenors and other potentially interested women she could think of, suggesting that 'a number of us who teach and research in Women's Studies in higher education institutions around Australia are beginning to feel that it is time that an Australian Women's Studies Association was formed'. Dr Gretchen Poiner, convenor of the Women's Studies Section of ANZAAS '88, had asked for a two hour slot to discuss a proposed women's studies association. Responses were received from all over Australia, most interest expressed by those heading women's studies units, teaching in women's studies our wishing to establish women's studies.



*AWSA founder, Lyndall Ryan,
preserved her conference
organisor's badge
for the AWSA conference in
Adelaide*

Caroline Ralston, convenor of Women's Studies Committee, Macquarie University replied, 'many of us teaching in Women's Studies here at Macquarie University would greatly favour' the proposal. Pat Grimshaw, University of Melbourne¹ felt it was 'high time' especially for feminist scholars in 'uncongenial disciplinary areas'. She suggested that AWSA membership should be linked with subscriptions to *Australian Feminist Studies*. Others replied: 'ABSOLUTELY YES!' (Bev Thiele, School of Social Inquiry, Murdoch University, enclosing comments from Jan Currie); 'a wonderful move' (Robyn Rowland, Senior lecturer in Women's Studies, Deakin University, asking for a half page notice for the newsletter²); 'strongly in favour' (Anne Edwards, Centre for Women's Studies, Monash University, but 'will be overseas' during ANZAAS); a 'terrific idea' (Judith Allen, lecturer in women's studies, Griffith University, who wanted also to 'get to the Mitchell Library'); 'interested' (Anna Yeatman, Sociology, Flinders University, but not attending ANZAAS); 'a wonderful idea but ANZAAS is so expensive'³ (Dorothy Broom, Women's Studies Program, Australian National University). Delys Bird, MPhil Co-ordinator, Australian Studies and Women's Studies, University of

¹ Noting that Marilyn Lake's lectureship in women's studies was to be refilled now that Marilyn had departed to women's studies at La Trobe University

² The notice was published in issue 2, March 1988, authored by Susan Magarey, Lyndall Ryan and Susan Sheridan, suggesting that anyone with ideas should write to Lyndall Ryan

³ Susan Magarey, Research Centre for Women's Studies, University of Adelaide, who advertised the notice in *Australian Feminist Studies*, number 5, noted that day and half day registrations at \$50 and \$25 'would be steep for the unwaged' but pointed out that people come to sessions whether or not they have paid their registrations.

Western Australia, could not attend the meeting but wrote a long letter, suggesting that the issue of entry into women's studies should be canvassed, given women who have plenty of 'women's experience' cannot gain entry into UWA's newly established MPhil, commenting on the mainstreaming or named women's studies centres debate and 'the politics of calling women's studies "gender studies"'⁴.

The meeting at ANZAAS appointed an interim committee to produce a constitution and organize a conference at which AWSA would 'formally constitute itself as an association'. The interim committee consisted of Lyndall Ryan, Sue Sheridan, Margie Ripper, Susan Magarey, Maureen Dyer, Jasmine Payget (and possibly others). Correspondence with Norman Waterhouse solicitors covered the Constitution's clauses, mechanisms for achieving tax exemption⁵ and the process of incorporation⁶. The Association received its certificate of incorporation as an association in South Australia on 13 April 1992. The date for renewal of membership was later (1998) set at 14 April, Lyndall Ryan's birthday in recognition of her role as the founding president of AWSA. In October 1991, the solicitors presented their bill of \$1072.66 for their services in preparing AWSA's constitution.

Following registration of AWSA in South Australia, Australian law requires AWSA to set out on 'every public body issues, signed or published by the body the body's name, the body's Australian registered body number, the name of the body's place of origin' ('incorporated S.A') and notice that 'the liability of the body's members is limited' 'At every office, the body must display its name and name of its place of origin' notice of limited liability and 'in the case of its registered office, the words "registered office" in a conspicuous place' (Cathy Cooper, Norman Waterhouse Solicitors, letter to 'Ms Ryan', 1 October 1991).

A draft of the Constitution was approved at the Annual General Meeting held at the inaugural Conference in Adelaide in 1989. A steering committee was appointed⁷ and membership fees set⁸. It

⁴ Other names were circled in a list of addresses, suggesting that letters were also sent to Carol Adams, History, University of Sydney; Marian Aveling, History, Monash University; Verity Burgmann, History, University of Melbourne; Lenore Coltheart, Glebe; Janet Critchett, Warnambool; Louise Douglas, Power House Museum; June Fielding, Sociology, University of Queensland; Shirley Fitzgerald, Archives, Sydney City Council; Anne Game, Sociology, University of New South Wales; Jan Gothard, History, Murdoch University; Susan Grogan, History, University of Western Australia; Anthea Hyslop, History, University of Adelaide; Margaret James, Rosanna, Judith Keene, History, University of Sydney; Beverley Kingston, History, University of New South Wales; Elizabeth Kwan, Magill; Judy Macinolty, Petersham; Ann McGrath, History, University of New South Wales; Robin McLachlan, Communication, Mitchell C.A.E.; Drusilla Modjeska, Humanities, New South Wales Institute of Technology; Barbara Bubra-Litic, Psychology, UWA (but who had died two years previously).

⁵ Which was rejected in a letter from the Australian Tax Office on 6 May 1992, on the basis that the organization is not a 'charitable organisation' but has the political purpose of advancing women's studies. However as a non-profit organization, no income tax liability accrues for assessable income below \$416 in any year, the case as subscriptions and other contributions from members are not assessable income.

⁶ This required becoming incorporated under a state act (in this case S.A.) at the cost of \$210 and then applying to the Australian Securities Commission to register the association under the Corporations Law if nationwide recognition is required. National registration required the proposed name - the Australian Women's Studies Association (AWSA) - to be reserved, lodgment of an Application Form, Statutory Declaration, copy of the Constitution and an Application Fee of \$84.

⁷ Judith Allen, Chilla Bulbeck (both Griffith University), Gabrielle Bushell (Deakin University), Barbara Caine (University of Sydney), Deborah Chambers (University of Western Sydney), Joan Eveline and Bev Thiele (both of Murdoch University), Sue Ng (TAFE, Perth), Julie Ruth (Victoria), Lyndall Ryan (Flinders University, as president until 1991), Kay Schaffer (Women's Studies SACAE - City).

was suggested that the Association and a proposed national research centre would make a submission to secure a research fellow, research the low participation rate of women in postgraduate study, develop a data base of research projects and interests so members could be alerted to grant opportunities, and collect and exchange information both nationally and internationally.

The rules of the Australian Women's Studies Association (AWSA) identify its objectives:

1. to promote and co-ordinate the teaching, study and research of women's studies in Australia; to be a national voice on Women's Issues; and to promote links with other international studies, organisations and associations overseas. Its activities have included but are not limited to:
 - to lobby to promote women's studies;
 - to make submissions to governments and other bodies with respect to women's studies;
 - to provide a data base and a network of information on women's studies;
 - to carry out research relating to women's studies;
 - to research, advise and report on curriculum issues with respect to the teaching of women's studies;
 - to encourage and support students in women's studies;
 - to provide advice to educational institutions and governments relating to women's studies;
 - to hold women's studies conferences;
 - to apply for and receive and administer any grants, bequests or endowments or loans from the State or Commonwealth Governments or from any other source;
 - to attract encourage and solicit donations and gifts to or for the benefit of the Association from any source deemed appropriate to the promotion of the objects of the Association;
2. to be a national voice on women's issues.
3. To promote links with other international studies organizations and associations overseas⁹.

The main focus of AWSA since 1989 have been conferences and a more intermittent newsletter. It has also lobbied universities about the state of Women's Studies.

Conferences

1st national conference, Adelaide, Adelaide University, 1989

The inaugural Australian Women's Studies National Conference was held in Adelaide in July 1989, with 170 registrants, most from South Australia, although every state and territory as well as New Zealand was represented. Attendees came from equal opportunity units, women's information networks, other government departments, the Rural Women's Network, as well as the university, CAE and TAFE sector.

A press release drafted for the conference said 'Hundreds of women from around the country will converge on Adelaide next month to launch the first Australian Women's Studies Association'. Lyndall Ryan, conference spokesperson, hailed the conference: 'Until now we have been operating in a vacuum, we don't have a national picture of what is happening in women's studies nor a national public profile'. She noted the importance of women's studies in allowing 'females in particular to get

⁸ \$100 for institutions, \$50 for the group rate, \$40 for waged and \$15 for unwaged members. Membership fees were actually reduced ten years later, being set in 1999-2000 as follows: Waged: \$30 (1 year) and \$50 (2 years); Unwaged (including students): \$15 (1 year) and \$25 (2 years); Institutional: \$150 (1 year) (student organisations can negotiate to join for less).

⁹ There follows rules concerning employment, and carrying out activities.

access to the intellectual processes of academic work in universities'¹⁰. The theme was 'The politics of women's studies for the 1990s'¹¹. The cost was \$45 per head, and included a book of abstracts. The two keynote speakers were Helen L'Orange, First Assistant Secretary, Office of the Status of Women, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet who discussed 'Women's Studies in the Dawkins Era' and Professor Fay Gale, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Adelaide University, then vice-chancellor elect to the University of Western Australia, who expressed concern at the 'proposed higher education mergers', suggesting 'amalgamation discussions will be working against any kind of interdisciplinary programs' such as women's studies. Seven participants used childcare facilities at the conference, two offered to billet delegates and 11 sought billeting.

2rd: Melbourne, University of Melbourne, 1990

Attracted 150 registrants with 250 attending the first session. The first two Antipodean professors of women's studies, Judith Allen at Griffith University and Anna Yeatman at the University of Waikato, were keynote speakers at the conference. At the AWSA general meeting it was suggested that the next conference include childcare, a transport pool for students, more workshop formats, that the lesbian and Aboriginal sessions did not clash and that 'more involvement of Aboriginal women in the conference in a wider range of ways be encouraged'.

3rd: Brisbane, Griffith University, 1991

The theme was 'Policy, politics and research' with the purpose of initiating 'productive dialogue between feminist academics and women working in bureaucracies, private enterprise etc – so that our research can be policy-oriented where feasible'¹². One of the keynote speakers was Aileen Moreton-Robinson and funding was secured from AIDAB to sponsor two women from PNG's peak women's organization, including one running for parliament. The policy and community sector were well represented in speakers and delegates

4th: Sydney, Sydney University, 1992

Themes included designing women's studies courses, teaching about women, gender and difference, feminism and postmodernism, rethinking lesbian desire, 'demonstrating the strength, innovativeness and energy evident in Women's Studies'. The conference was preceded the History of Australian Feminism Conference. The AGM's vote of thanks made particular mention of the art installation in the Menzies Room and the poetry readings by Gwen Harwood and Dorothy Hewett.

5th: Geelong, Deakin University, 1994

The theme was 'Women and the politics of change', and the conference was followed by the Australian Sociological Association Conference.

¹⁰ Press release, Kate Thomas, SACAE, Public Relations, 27 June 1989.

¹¹ Sessions on the first day addressed teaching women in science (Nessie Allen), religion (Erin White), law (Judy Grbich), medicine and nursing (Stephanie Short), science and medicine (Ann Dugdale), adult education (M Montgomerie and J Ritchie) and TAFE (Janet Pine), Asian women in Australia and the women's studies curriculum (Karobe Mukherjee), women's studies as a consciousness raiser in the community (Robyn Harris), the women's movement and teacher unions (Julie Ryder), and on the second day included 'What ever happened to the politics of women's liberation in feminist research' (Renate Klein); 'Relationships between women's studies and gender studies' (Deborah Chambers), 'new visual resources in women's studies' (Pat Kelly, SA Film and Video Unit); 'Assessment of women's studies students' (Dorothy Broom). Jan Pettman offered a workshop on 'feminism and racism' to 'explore the concept of sisterhood, with a view to developing a more inclusive feminism', strategies for an 'antiracist feminism'.

¹² Chilla Bulbeck, conference organizer, letter to Lyndall Ryan 4 March 1991.

6th. Perth, University of Western Australia, 1996

About 200 women attended the conference. Contrary to usual custom, the convenors chose not to accept all offers of papers, producing a strong program of high quality. Each day was opened with a keynote address, by Jindy Pettman, Joan Eveline and Moira Gatens. A number of papers grappled with issues of feminism and difference, particularly the differences of colour and culture. The conference was officially opened by Lorna Little, a Nyoongah elder, proud to be a 'bullshit' artist and storyteller, passing on her women's cultural traditions in both a serious and playful way. Lorna Little's voice was the only Indigenous voice formally included in the conference program. There were, however, a handful of participants and speakers from non-Anglo Australian backgrounds¹³. Despite their relative physical absence, Indigenous Australian women and women of non-English Speaking background were present in at least eighteen of the 60 presentations. Moira Gatens linked her address to Lorna Little's official opening. Little's circle of witnesses to her stories carry them forward and we were given the opportunity to become part of that circle. Gatens noted that the sociability of the feminist imaginary means that 'it is necessarily open to others who may step forward and bear witness to its truth, or who may refuse to bear witness because of its partiality, or its pretensions to universality'. Indeed, many Indigenous Australian women 'refuse to bear witness'¹⁴. But in their refusal, they enter the discourse of white western feminism and transform it¹⁵, probably more so than white feminism transforms Indigenous discourse. Jindy Pettman, who gave the opening keynote address, attempts to speak these differences because of the urgent need for strategic essentialism:

Indigenous women, and migrant or ethnic minority women (struggling to find the right language, to think about what's coded in those names) have taught me a lot about difference ... There is still a way to go, but I do think that we've learnt something along the way, and that more white feminists than white men know that they are white.

The conference demonstrated the sociability of Australian feminists (sometimes marred by unsociability, I know), and the ways in which feminists witness each other's theorising while also attempting to find responses to the voices (and refusals) of women of colour. Australian academic feminism is not barred into little homes named radical, socialist and liberal feminism, but is eclectic in its search for new cartographies, alert to the voices of many witnesses, and still trying to move forward with an agenda which is political and ethical as well as theoretical.

7th. Adelaide, University of South Australia, organized jointly by Flinders University and University of Adelaide, 1998

The press release described this conference as 'Women's studies conference is coming home'. Over 120 women (and several men) participated, including a number of secondary school teachers and students of women's studies, women's studies teachers in TAFE and of course women's studies scholars from around Australia and Aotearoa. Instead of an overarching theme, the organising

¹³ A session which explored the work of four Asian women artists working in Perth was presented by Christine Choo and Antoinette Carrier. Wahidah Zein Br. Siregar discussed feminism in Indonesia, eliciting a response from an Indonesian woman in the audience. This was my first memory of an exchange at an AWSA conference where both speakers were from beyond the white west.

¹⁴ See for example Lucashenko, Melissa (1994) 'No Other Truth?: Aboriginal Women and Australian Feminism' *Social Alternatives* 12(4):21-24; Huggins, Jackie (1994) 'A Contemporary View of Aboriginal Women's Relationship to the White Women's Movement' in Norma Grieve and Ailsa Burns (eds.) *Australian Women: Contemporary Feminist Thought* Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

¹⁵ Yeatman, Anna (1993) 'Voice and Representation in the Politics of Difference' in Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman (eds.) *Feminism and The Politics of Difference* St Leonards: Allen and Unwin

committee selected four themes they considered of topical interest to feminist educators and researchers: 'Insights from feminist economics', 'W(h)ither feminism in the 21st century', 'Whether the republic?' and 'Skirting feminism'. The four keynote speakers were Katrina Power, Chair of Tandanya Aboriginal Cultural Institute, whose paper 'Faith Street' discussed the alliance of Lady Jessie Street and Faith Bandler in spearheading the 1967 referendum campaign which resulted in the right to vote for Indigenous Australians; Valerie Walkerdine, Professor of Critical Psychology at the University of Western Sydney, whose recent research found that, while middle class girls may increasingly 'succeed', their success is not remotely matched by working class girls; Catharine Lumby, whose talk 'The president's penis: feminism meets tabloid culture', argued that infotainment and day time chat shows blur the public-private distinction and news now discusses 'feminist' issues such as sexual harassment; Hon. Carmen Lawrence, Federal Member for Fremantle and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women, who spoke on the gender gap in voting¹⁶.

Conference delegates were 'welcomed' several times during the conference. Aunty Josie Agius, Kaurna elder, welcomed us to the Aboriginal land on which the conference was held. Professor Denise Bradley, Vice-Chancellor of the University of South Australia, welcomed delegates to the University of SA which provided free use of its facilities for the conference. Professor Bradley referred to the Conference's location in the Barbara Hanrahan Building, named after an Adelaide artist and writer who had worked in the SA School of Art, the longest continuing teaching institution in South Australia (and now located within the University of SA). Adelaide's other female vice-chancellor, Professor Mary O'Kane, welcomed delegates to the University of Adelaide at the launch of Chilla Bulbeck's two books *Living Feminism* and *Reorienting Western Feminisms* and the imminent release of the latest issue of *Australian Feminist Studies*. Professor O'Kane, along with Cambridge University Press and Australian Feminist Studies, sponsored the launch at which Professor Lyndall Ryan, Professor of Women's Studies at Flinders University, and Professor Anne Edwards, Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Flinders University, spoke. The Hon Diana Laidlaw, Minister for the Status of Women (and transport and the arts) welcomed delegates to South Australia at the Conference dinner, reminding her audience of the continuing achievements of South Australian women in parliament, the arts and the academy.

'Skirting Feminism in the Nineties' was organized by Adelaide University's postgraduate students Shannon Dowling and Michelle Jones to showcase postgraduate students' work. After a short video showing staff and students of women's studies at Adelaide University ruminating on the meaning of feminism, the video producers and the convenors, Shannon Dowling and Michelle Jones, entered the lecture theatre dressed as nuns and introduced Catherine Lumby. This was followed with presentations by nine postgraduate students from around Australia (while other postgraduates were represented elsewhere in the program). A 'class' registration rate offered for this day and scholarships for needy women's studies high school students allowed for a younger and more diverse audience than on the other conference days. In their press release, the convenors said 'Skirting Feminisms is contemporary and on the edge. Feminism can no longer be hijacked by the old guard', pointing to a program including third wave feminism, young women as political agents, feminism and ethnicity, lesbian identities and the men's movement¹⁷: 'The plurality of voices reflected in the program illustrates the complexity of contemporary feminism'.

¹⁶ And whose 1994 women's budget statement news release was printed in the AWSA newsletter, vol 9, nos 1 and 2.

¹⁷ Scheduling a lesbian paper in the same session with a men's movement paper (presented by a man) prompted a complaint and walk-out by some lesbian delegates, the conference report concluding that the latter paper should have been scheduled with almost any other event. A lesbian-only event should be scheduled before or along with the conference so lesbians have a chance to network.

Sixty-one further papers were presented, seven of them being refereed papers which were printed in the conference proceedings along with the keynote addresses¹⁸. Both Catharine Lumby and Carmen Lawrence were featured on the ABC's national television news on the last evening of the conference, while there was press and radio coverage on a number of occasions.

In its report, the organising committee queried whether keynote speakers should be invited, their total cost being in the vicinity of \$3000-\$4000, including free conference registration and dinner attendance, significantly raising the conference registration fees. Being busy women in high demand, none were able to attend beyond the day or session of their presentation. The keynote speaker designation does create an invidious comparison between 'famous' and 'other' speakers. Another alternative is to focus on inviting keynote speakers from the local geographical area¹⁹.

8th. Sydney, Macquarie University, 2001

Attracting only 65 delegates, although budgeting for 100, the theme was 'casting new shadows': while welcoming all topics and all disciplines in Women's Studies, the conference will focus on the theme 'Casting New Shadows': 'We hope that thinking about the shadows cast by examining new objects for thought in a changing feminist light will bring people from a variety of backgrounds together to discuss the intersections of race and gender, new sexualities, new questions on education, health, creating and writing in the shadow of feminists past, gender and multiculturalism, new colonial powers, immigration, media, new feminist generations, changing materialisms, etc....' (Conference organizers). Instead of keynote speakers, the conference paired established and early career researchers who discussed how their work had influenced each other.

9th. Brisbane, University of Queensland, 2003

Convened by Carole Ferrier, then President of AWSA, and co-sponsored by the Research Centre for Women, Gender, Culture and Social Change at the University of Queensland. Some 150 Australian and international delegates presented papers at the conference held at the Women's College at the University of Queensland from 12-16 July 2003. The size and vitality of this conference was a strong indication of the vigorous health of feminist scholarship in Australia and the continuing role of the AWSA as an appropriate organisation for fostering this work. The conference theme — *(Other) Feminisms* — was flexibly interpreted by participants, lending a surprising diversity to presentations. Keynote speakers included: Elizabeth Wilson and Gabriele Griffin. One of the most satisfying strands of the conference was the focus on histories of women's liberation and feminism in Australia. Despite the fact that several book-length historical studies on this topic had appeared in recent years, there was strong evidence that plenty of uncharted terrain remained and it was good to see papers mining other seams and actively questioning what new histories might look (and sound) like. Moreover, for many in

¹⁸ For the first, and so far only, time the conference published refereed conference papers, the committee receiving 14 papers. This greatly increased the workload of the convenors and the organising committee although it was well worthwhile in both improving the quality of the papers and promoting the careers of women's studies colleagues.

¹⁹ The organising committee sought sponsorship from publishers, Fauldings, female wine-makers, and the Vice-Chancellor of Adelaide University, Mary O'Kane, who welcomed delegates. The only sponsorship we secured, besides Ansett as the conference airline, was the free use of the venue (University of SA), a \$500 contribution to the book launch (Vice-Chancellor University of Adelaide) and secretarial support with mailing the conference registration brochures and preparing and printing the proceedings (Flinders University, Lyndall Ryan's secretary), \$500 towards an *Australian Feminist Studies* journal launch from Susan Magarey and \$500 towards the book launch from Cambridge University Press.

the audience it was a pleasure to take a break from the tired public discourse on the ‘sins’ of our feminist foremothers and the movement’s ‘flawed legacies’ to ponder the motivations, methods and genuine achievements of women’s liberation activists in this country. Notable here were papers by Margaret Henderson and Marg Reid on making history from the archives of Brisbane’s Women’s House (1973-83) and Susan Magarey on the ways in which the Australian women’s liberation movement sponsored its own ‘cultural renaissance’. These papers were usefully complemented by others from Louise Poland and from Diane Brown and Maryanne Lynch each examining aspects of the history of feminist publishing in Australia since the 1970s. Interestingly, position papers concerning the field of Women’s or Gender Studies were not an overly significant feature of the conference, despite the AWSA representing the national ‘peak body’ for the field. The one panel devoted to the topic of Women’s and Gender Studies in different ways addressed the strategic engagements required of these programs if they are to survive and prosper internationally within systems of higher education now dedicated to market-based priorities. In addition to regular academic sessions, delegates were offered a spectacular array of performances, music and poetry providing the opportunity to feed not only minds, but also hearts and souls. Selected papers from the conference appeared in *Hecate*, 29 (2003).

10th: Melbourne, Monash University, 2006

Convened by Maryanne Dever and JaneMaree Maher of the Centre for Women’s Studies & Gender Research at Monash University, this conference was held 9-12 July 2006 at Hotel Y in central Melbourne. The 2006 conference theme was ‘TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY FEMINISMS’. Plenary speakers were: Lisa Adkins, Manchester University; Carolyn Allport, President, National Tertiary Education Union; Annamarie Jagose, Auckland University; Maria Jaschok, Gender Institute, Oxford University; and Rachel Fensham, University of Surrey, Guildford. The conference featured approx. 110 speakers from Australia and overseas. At the AGM for this conference, a vote was taken to change the name of the association to Australian Women’s and Gender Studies Association (AWGSA), in recognition of the growing diversity among feminist focused programs nationally. This conference was also marked by a lively postgraduate workshop convened prior to the main conference and a well-attended meeting of convenors of WS and GS programs on the day following the conference.

Passing the baton: extracts from (surviving) AGM minutes

At the 1991 AGM, Barbara Caine was elected president, Robyn Rowland vice president, Rosemary Pringle secretary, Deborah Chambers, treasurer and newsletter editor, Lyndall Ryan, Janet Hancock, Felicity Grace and Bev Thiele (‘if she accepts nomination’) as members.

At the AGM in 1992, Robyn Rowland was elected president, with Deborah Chambers and Chilla Bulbeck as Vice-Presidents, Lyndall Ryan as secretary, and Margaret Bearlin, Audrey Bolger, Felicity Grace, Jo Milne-Holme, Jan van Bommel as committee members.

At the AGM in 1994, the secretary and the president were absent. Murdoch University offered to host the next conference. The meeting agreed to sponsor women to attend the Women and Labor Conference in 1995 to the tune of \$2000. The elected national executive was Ruchira Ganguly-Scrase (Tasmania), Karen Coleman (NSW, Secretary), Maureen Dyer (SA), Belinda Carpenter (Qld), Chilla Bulbeck (ACT), Robyn Rowland (Vic, President), to be appointed (WA, presumably Bev Thiele, and presumably appointed treasurer at a later date).

In November 1996, Bev Thiele sent an email to Lyndall Ryan expressing concern that AWSA was ‘teetering on the brink a bit’, with the current president Robyn Rowland on leave and not knowing

'who else holds "current office"!!! I've emailed Renate [Klein] to see if she knows anything about state of the books etc. We have to decide whether to continue and if so in what form. I'd also like a "5-6 year plan" if we are to go on so that we are not lurching from conference to conference'. Bev Thiele called for a discussion at the next AWSA AGM concerning the continuation of AWSA, its future structure and establishing the next 2 to 3 rotations. In the absence of the president, Bev Thiele and Lyndall Ryan convened the 1996 AGM, Lyndall noting 'the organization was in need of some revitalisation'. No membership fees had been collected 'for some years; no newsletter published for at least 2 years, and only a small amount of political activity' undertaken. It was decided that AWSA would become a 'state-based executive for two year terms leading up to each biennial conference', the office bearers being from the state hosting the conference. The executive would then move to the next state holding the conference, with the location of two upcoming conferences known at any one time, i.e. at the AGM, the conference venue four years hence would be decided. It was proposed to revitalize the newsletter, possibly in electronic form.

Renate Klein transferred the AWSA funds held at Deakin University to Adelaide University, where Maureen Dyer agreed to convene the new executive and host the 1998 conference. She won a consultancy in Papua New Guinea and passed the conference organisation to Chilla Bulbeck, who took on the AWSA presidency, and Lyndall Ryan. In order to revitalize membership, 1000 copies of the first newsletter produced by Myra Betschild and Maureen Dyer were distributed to 'blanket Australia' using lists from various sources. This also served to publicise the 1988 conference in Adelaide.

The AWSA executive was intended to pass to New South Wales along with conference organization, but the additional convenorship of AWSA was too burdensome for Macquarie University colleagues. An unconstitutional de facto Adelaide executive continued to operate²⁰ and disbursed some of the \$15,000 in the accounts at the conclusion of the 1988 conference. \$5,000 was given to ausfem polnet which was under threat of survival so Elizabeth Shannon could purchase a new computer; \$5,000 was sent as seed funding to Wendy Waring for the 2001 conference. In December, 2001, when the incoming president, Carole Ferrier, was elected at the AGM and AWSA passed to Queensland, the de facto Adelaide executive forwarding a final amount of around \$6,000 as a cheque to Carole Ferrier.

Newsletter

In 1988, Robyn Rowland and Rose Mildenhall issued the first 'Australian Women's Studies Newsletter', at five dollars for two issues later raised to \$10, with the purpose of sharing information about visiting speakers, conferences, activities at the women's studies units around Australia. Robyn Rowland published five issues over two years, signing off to 'sisters' and later 'sisters and colleagues'. The Australian Federation of University Women's scholarships were advertised, as well as the International Women's Development Agency, run by women for women, a proposal to establish the Jessie Street Memorial Library, the inaugural Australian Feminist Book Fortnight held in September 1989. The journals *Refractory Girl*, *Hecate* and *Australian Feminist Studies* were advertised in each issue.

The newsletter moved to Griffith University in 1990 where Chilla Bulbeck promised her 'sisters and colleagues' four issues each year. She sought, as Lyndall Ryan put it, 'gossip, visitors, industrial matters, current controversies, job opportunities, projects and feminist research, ideas for new

²⁰ consisting of Chilla Bulbeck, Margie Ripper, Kay Schaffer, Myra Betschild, Margaret Allen, Judith Gill, Liz Hooper, Susan Magarey and Sue Sheridan.

courses'²¹ In fact, the newsletter expanded from conference notices and reports from women's studies centres to include job advertisements, book reviews, publications and activities.

At the 1992 AGM, newsletter responsibility passed to Deborah Chambers and Jo Milne-Holme (Women's Research Centre, University of Western Sydney), starting with a proposed March 1992 issue. At the AGM in 1994, it was proposed that some newsletter monies accumulated at the University of Western Sydney be transferred to Deakin University to 'help pay for the conference' (that had just been held). Given that it was also suggested that the Centre for Research on Women (Perth) might take over production of the newsletter, an urgent issue as new office bearers were needed for the newsletter committee, production of the newsletter appeared to have lapsed by this point.

In 1996, following the AGM held at the Perth conference, publication was renewed under the editorship of Myra Betschild and Maureen Dyer who prepared two professional issues for a fee of \$2000 plus costs of printing and postage (around another \$1000) prior to the 1998 conference. They prepared one or two issues following the conference, but ceased their editorship when membership renewals and copy for the newsletter could not be secured despite constant remonstrance. Publication emerged in a new on-line mode when Carole Ferrier became President in 2001, leading up to the 2003 conference in Brisbane. See: <http://www.uq.edu.au/~encferr>.

Membership

An undated membership list from AWSA's early years contains around 250 names, most members coming from tertiary institutions (universities, CAEs, Institutes of Technology and TAFEs), but not only academics but also administrative officers and librarians; not only academics from women's studies, the humanities and social sciences but also a smattering from mathematics, computer science, dentistry. Members are drawn from a range of organizations, including the Association of Country and City Women Writers, Workers' Educational Association of SA, Women's Information Switchboard, Working Women's Centre, ACT Teachers Federation, Women in Engineering, Power House Museum, Family Planning Association of SA, Womanspeak, Women's Resources Centre, Social Alternatives (a magazine published in Brisbane), several undergraduate and postgraduate students' associations. Government departments are represented, not only equal opportunity units, the Office of the Status of Women (Cth), Women's Advisers Office (SA) and the Women's Bureau of Department of Employment, Education and Training, but also local councils, the education department, the police department. There were two university chancellors (Sister Deirdre Jordan, Flinders University; Dame Roma Mitchell, Adelaide University), three professors (Eileen Byrne, University of Queensland; Faye Gale, Adelaide University; Lenore Manderson, University of Queensland) and at least one Associate Professor (Beverley Kingston).

In 1992, there were about 80 paid up members and \$7000 in the newsletter account. At the conclusion of the 1998 conference, there were over 100 AWSA members, including 7 institutions, split about 50-50 between one and two year memberships²². Membership prior to the Casting New Shadows Conference had sunk to about 20 financial members with 80 names on a list indicating they were financial in either 1999 or 2000. At some point (the mid-1990s?) membership was tied to conference registration by offering members a discount on their registration for the national conference. As a

²¹ Chilla Bulbeck, editorial, newsletter, November 1990.

²² As no expiry date for membership was recorded some women had signed up for 2 plus 2 years, first joining in December 1996.

result, membership surged to nearly match conference registrations in the years in which conferences were held.

Lobbying

In 1988, the Research Committee of the Australian Women's Studies Association²³ resolved: 'we demand that the government make available 52 per cent of the national research budget to women', protested the 'increasing commercialization and commodification of knowledge and research', demanded that 'all research must be non-exploitative', 'accountable to participants', 'have a clear goal of informing positive social and intellectual change' and 'incorporate an explicit concern for economic and social justice'. In 1989, for the first time, the Australian Research Council included women's studies in its funding categories. However, the 1992 AGM reported that the ARC had dropped women's studies from its classification list; the AGM proposed a campaign for its reintroduction along with a women's studies panel. In discussion following the 'W(h)ither feminism in the 21st century' at the 1998 AWSA conference, Lyndall Ryan commented on the connections between the community and academia made possible with ARC and SPIRT grants, through which academic feminists can do community-oriented research. There was a call to return research to the community instead of the tendency over recent years to over-theorise and under-research.

In 1989, Lyndall Ryan sent 'a strong letter to the Chancellor of the University of Sydney on the closure of the Women's Research Unit', noting its five major research reports on the status of women at the University of Sydney produced since its inception in 1983. The Steering Committee gave 'no academic reason' for closing the unit apart from saving money and the claim that the newly formed EEO Unit was doing this work ('nonsense' as Marie de Lepervanche put it in her letter to Lyndall Ryan). Unfortunately, feminists 'did not win the day' but Gretchen Poiner, in a letter to Lyndall Ryan, suggested the response made it clear that the move was unpopular.

In 1990, AWSA wrote to the editor of WSIF (Women's Studies International Forum) to protest an article it published on Aboriginal women and domestic violence. According to Lyndall Ryan's history of AWSA, 'AWSA wrote this letter at the request of several Aboriginal women scholars in Australia. Aboriginal women have spoken at all the Women's studies conferences. An Aboriginal woman launched the conference in Perth in November 1996.'

In 1995 and 1996, the Association lobbied the Vice Chancellor at Adelaide University over the threatened loss of the proposed Chair in Women's studies and the threatened closure of the Women's studies Department²⁴.

In 1998-1999, Chilla Bulbeck, as president, wrote a letter to *The Australian's* higher education pages in support of women's studies at University of Tasmania but it wasn't been published, although women's studies at UTas survived.

²³ Diane Bell, Li Veit-Brause, Helen Thomson, Robyn Rowland, Hilary Rumley, Lynne Spender, Lyndall Ryan, and Dale Spender.

²⁴ According to Kay Schaffer at the 1996 AGM, 220 letters were sent to the Vice Chancellor of Adelaide University prompting a reversal of the decision not to appoint a chair in women's studies, the university seeking to renege on the decision once external funding was withdrawn (as I recall).

Ringling the changes: from AWSA to AWGSA

A document listing courses taught in women's studies, circa 1988, identified around 120 courses in Australia and New Zealand. They included re-entry workshops, self esteem/assertiveness courses (Beth Hansen, Lismore), 'General Lesbian Studies' (Sylvia Kinder, Transition Education Unit, Leabrook, SA) and theory and social movement courses: 'From Consciousness to Organisation' (Jill Matthews, ANU); 'The Women's Movement' (Marilyn Poole, Victoria College, Rusden Campus); 'Honours, Women's History' (Carol Bacchi, Adelaide University). Women and work courses included 'Political Economy of Women' (Carole Pateman, University of Sydney; Anne Riches, University of Sydney), and the more specific 'Women's Professional Careers' (Elizabeth Ozanne, University of Melbourne). Among the handful of 'women in society' courses, some were more specific than others: 'Women and Western Society' (Lyndall Ryan, Griffith University); 'History of feminist thought in the English Speaking West, 1780-1980' (Susan Magarey, Adelaide University). In literature departments, 'Women's Writing' in English, and less commonly French, including 'Itinéraires de Femmes' (Evelyn Winn, University of Sydney), were beginning to be joined by media studies: 'Women and Film' (Martha Aspler-Burnett, La Trobe University). 'Women's Health' (Margie Ripper, F.M.E.C.H, Royal Adelaide Hospital; Sue Stutsel, Gorokan High School, New South Wales) was also taught as 'Biology, Politics and Social Theory' (Rosalie Simal, Monash University). Women and education courses included 'History of Education of Women' (Ailsa Zainuddin, Monash University). Alongside women in religion courses were 'Goddess Religion' (Claire French, Council for Adult Education, Melbourne; Catherine Jones, Frankston TAFE College). Women and welfare courses included 'Women in Social Work Practice' (Wendy Weeks, Phillip Institute of Technology), while 'Domestic Violence' and 'Sexual Assault' were more focused (Jeana Sutton, Macarthur Institute of Higher Education). 'Women in Melanesia' (Diane Losche, Macquarie University), 'Ethnic and Aboriginal Women in Australia' and 'Women in Developing Countries' (Karobi Mukherjee, South Australian CAE, Salisbury) were among a handful exploring women's lives beyond the white west.

- Some initiatives associated with AWSA and the blooming of women's studies in Australia included *The Violet Pages: A Directory of Women's Studies Researchers in Australia and New Zealand*, compiled by Lenore Coltheart, Shirley Fitzgerald and Bronwyn Davies, the second, 1988 edition, could be purchased from a post office box in Sydney. At the 1992 AGM, Barbara Milech reported she was working on publication of a directory of women's studies courses in all universities in the unified system.

- In 1996, AWSA became a founding member of the World Organisation of Women's Studies, its first interdisciplinary international conference held at Adelaide University that year (under the convenorship of Susan Magarey).
- In 1998, Delys Bird, Director, Centre for Women's Studies, University of Western Australia, revitalised *Outskirts*, a feminist, cultural studies journal with a particular interest in postgraduate work. *Outskirts* is first online refereed feminist journal in Australia, published on the new women's studies website at UWA from November 1998: <http://www.chloe.uwa.edu.au/outskirts>.
- The South Australian group took over the judging of the Beryl Henderson Prize in 1998 and continued to do so until the prize was discontinued several years later.

1998 was the 25th anniversary of the first named women's studies subjects to be taught in Australia, offered at Flinders University in Adelaide²⁵ and at the University of Queensland²⁶. 1999 was the

²⁵ Magarey, Susan, Ryan Lyndall and Sheridan, Susan 1994. 'Women's Studies in Australia' in Norma Grieve and Ailsa Burns (eds.) *Australian Women: Contemporary Feminist Thought* Melbourne: Oxford University Press, p285.

fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, celebrated at the Universities of Tasmania, Queensland and Flinders University (the papers from Queensland are in the first issue of *Hecate* for 2000). In 1999, too, the longest running women's studies journal in Australia, *Hecate*, celebrated its 25th anniversary. Nevertheless, for some commentators, feminism entered a new millennium in 'dreary years'²⁷. Like other left social movements, feminism appears to be losing legislative and media favour in the wake of economic rationalism, globalisation, individualism and, some would argue, posthumanist and postmodernist discourses. Under the Howard federal government, the femocracy and the women's movement have been particularly targeted, causing suffering to women more generally. In discussion following the 'W(h)ither feminism in the 21st century' at the 1998 AWSA conference, Eleanor Ramsay suggested feminism was 'again' a dirty word rather than 'still', and as a result of the wedge politics of the Howard government which seeks to separate 'good women' from whingers, 'good' migrants from bludgers etc. The Office for the Status of Women, the Women's Electoral Lobby and the National Council for Single Mothers and their Children have been defunded while \$50,000 was directed to the Lone Fathers Association; government support for childcare, supporting parents and legal aid for women suffering domestic violence has been reduced²⁸. Lynne Segal wondered whether feminism 'has become little more than a blip in the march of economic neo-liberalism'²⁹.

In the last ten years, Australian university funding almost doubled, from \$4.3 billion to \$8.2 billion but the Australian government since 1976 has almost halved the percentage of its GDP spent on higher education, from 1.7 per cent in 1976 to 1% in the late 1990s³⁰. In 1983 the Australian government financed 91% per cent of higher education expenditure; in 1997 it was 45.8%, and students now cover some 35 to 40 per cent of university operating costs through the Higher Education Contribution Scheme³¹. Bill Readings claims that marginalised voices - female, black, gay - have only won the citadel now that universities no longer matter³². Thus cultural studies has stormed the citadel, displacing the literary canon, only to find that the laissez-faire governments of economic rationalism no longer care about the project of a national unifying culture, and thus no longer see universities as flagships of nation-building.

As part of a review of the humanities in Australia, 'gender studies' was placed in front of 'women's studies' in Terry Threadgold's report. Threadgold argued that the shift from women's studies to gender studies signals a move from the social sciences to cultural studies and from political activism linked with community groups and the government to a cultural politics³³. Someone at the 1992 AWSA conference compared the 'daggy' social sciences (women's studies) with the new 'sexy' cultural studies (gender studies), to which Robyn Rowland took exception, pointing out that dags hung from the

²⁶ Thornton, Merle 1999. 'Scenes from a life in feminism' *Hecate* 25(2): 27-35, p33

²⁷ A term Carole Ferrier used to describe the years in which *The Second Sex* was published - 'Editorial' *Hecate* 25(2):4

²⁸ Sawyer, Marian 1999. 'EMILY's List and angry white men: gender wars in the nineties' *Journal of Australian Studies* number 62: 1-9,236-7, p4

²⁹ Segal, Lynne 1999. *Why Feminism? Gender, Psychology, Politics* New York: Columbia University Press p1

³⁰ *The Weekend Australian* 19-20 June 1999:4

³¹ Marginson, Simon 1997. *Educating Australia: Government, Economy and Citizen since 1990* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p236; Karmel, Peter 2000. 'Funding universities' in Tony Coady (ed.) *Why Universities Matter: A Conversation About Values, Means and Directions* St Leonards: Allen and Unwin.

³² Readings, Bill 1996. *The University in Ruins* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press

³³ Threadgold, Terry 1998. 'Gender studies and women's studies' in Reference Group for the Australian Academy of the Humanities (ed.) *Knowing Ourselves and Others: The Humanities in Australia into the 21st Century, volume 2* Canberra: Australian Research Council, Discipline Research Strategies.

rear ends of sheep. However, the theoretical differences between, and political import of naming, women's studies and gender studies had been on the back-burner since at least the inception of AWSA. Delys Bird, in her reply to Lyndall Ryan's letter testing the waters to establish AWSA, expressed interest in 'the politics of calling women's studies "gender studies"'. Similarly, Ann Hone (??), School of Education, Canberra CAE, noting the need 'to guard against excluding women who do not necessarily have the "right ideological" stance, also presciently suggested problems with 'women's studies' and favouring 'gender relations' due to her work on masculinities. In a 1994 edition of the newsletter³⁴ President of AWSA Robyn Rowland commented: 'I believe that the first position in "gender studies" was recently advertised. Along with the push within education circles to take care of boys who have been "discriminated against" by the current focus on girls' education, this may mean the development of an attack on women's studies programs as happened in the US'.

A search of every Australian university's website in mid-1999 revealed that more teaching areas describe themselves as women's studies than as gender studies. Nevertheless, hardly a university website has been untouched by the debate concerning nomenclature. For example, at La Trobe, 'Today, the focus of Women's Studies has expanded to include consideration of the complex interrelationships which exist between sex, femininity, masculinity and other social characteristics, such as sexuality, ethnicity, race, class and age'. At ANU, women's studies engages 'critically with diverse and growing fields of feminist and cultural theory'. At Monash, women's studies is taught on the Clayton campus and gender studies on the Gippsland Campus. Women's studies is described as 'recuperative', while gender studies 'aims to take more relational and exploratory approaches to the study of the social construction of gender than its originating discipline, Women's Studies'. Sydney University is the most thoroughly gendered studies site. In 1998, the name was changed from women's studies to the Department of Gender Studies, explained as: 'Whilst in no way heralding a shift away from a concern for women's issues, the Department feels that these issues must be placed within a theoretical framework that interrogates the cultures and histories of gender and sexuality'.

In discussion following the 'W(h)ither feminism in the 21st century' at the 1998 AWSA conference, Shannon Dowling, then a postgraduate student in women's studies at the University of Adelaide, describing herself as an activist in feminist, indigenous and student issues, concluded that young feminists did not find the distinction between theory and politics useful or relevant to their practices. In her short history of AWSA, from 1989 to 1998, Lyndall Ryan concluded 'The best years of the Association are before it'. To mark the change AWSA has become AWGSA, has gone online, but still needs and looks for the blood and brain energy of feminists and women's studies scholars, old and new alike.

³⁴ volume 9, numbers 1 and 2.