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The first issue of the *Women's Weekly*, dated 10 June 1933 and priced at twopence sold 120,000 copies to make a profit of £80.0.0 for its publishers, the young Frank Packer and E. G. Theodore, recently Treasurer in the Commonwealth Labor government and, before that, Premier of Queensland. Like Rupert Murdoch today, Frank Packer delighted in new printing techniques and in up-to-the-minute ideas, largely American; consequently, the *Weekly* got a colour cover and the Mandrake cartoon in 1934, followed by its first colour issue late in 1936. Sales reached 450,000 in 1939 and 650,000 in 1945.

The *Weekly* had gone to war. Theodore became director of allied works and Packer joined his staff as director of personnel. They used the *Weekly* to boost morale and to encourage women who found that their place in war-time was not in the home. After the war, the *Weekly* reversed its preaching and promoted the argument that Australia had either to 'populate or perish'. The 1940s and early 1950s were the *Weekly's* golden age, when it sold to a larger proportion of the population than at any other time and when it was entirely sure of its values.

Esme Fenston joined the *Weekly* in 1938, becoming its editor from 1950 until her death in 1972. Fenston's marriage was childless and she devoted herself full-time to the *Weekly*, where her energies and strengths belied her tiny figure and good manners even when taking the wind out of blustering male executives. It is Fenston's style that some people still think of when they imagine the *Weekly*. The royal tour and its own 21st birthday made 1954 an important year for the *Weekly* and in the anniversary issue Fenston explained her approach:

This is a family paper, because we believe that the family is the most important unit in the community. It is addressed primarily to the woman of the house, because we believe that it is the woman on whom the success of the family life depends. We produce this paper for the best kind of women simply because we believe that there are more of that kind than any other.

Shortly before her death in 1972, Fenston defended the *Weekly* by arguing:

About half the paper is devoted to service features which help women with the common tasks of cooking, sewing, knitting, and generally looking after a family. Women's lib notwithstanding, the facts of life are that most women in jobs, married or not, educated or ignorant, must also do their own chores. I don't feel women's magazines need apologise for servicing this part of their readers' lives.¹⁰

Towards the end of 1976, 18 months after becoming editor, Ila Buttrose explained her tasks at the *Weekly* in exactly the same terms as Esme Fenston had used early in 1972:

With the Royal Family (perennial favourites), Jackie Onassis ('About two years ago you couldn't go wrong with her; today she's not so popular'), and Princess Caroline ('Always good; you see, she's young. She's romantic and she's just about to set off on her life') the *Women's Weekly* offers patterns, knitting, crochet, fashions in the shops and cooking. It's a successful formula which has served over 41 years.¹¹

This tale of continuity at the *Weekly* was what Buttrose told her readers through the pages of the daily press.

She had a different story for the trade journal, *Advertising Weekly*:

I think that magazines have recognised the change in Australian women. And certainly the *Australian Women's Weekly* has changed considerably in the last 10 years.

I'm not talking about our change in size. I'm talking about our change in attitude.¹²

That change in attitude began in 1972 when the *Weekly's* average sales were peaking around 860,000. Despite that success, the *Weekly's* publishers recognised that the formula which Fenston had inherited and sustained was not suited to the women with the most money to spend in the 1970s. And if these better-off women did not read the *Weekly*, then the Packers could not package them as bait to get more advertising revenue.

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One early sign of these changes to the social and economic status of women had occurred in the mid-1960s when professional women started to buy *Now*, a serious English glossy. The identification of new target audiences for merchandisers encouraged the expansion of *Vogue* as well as the establishment of *Pol*, *Belle* and *Dolly*. Sir Frank Packer's first response to these developments had been to buy the rights to the American publication *Cosmopolitan*. When this deal fell through and *Cosmopolitan's* publishers, the Hearst Corporation, decided to enter the Australian market. The younger Packer son, Kerry, until then regarded as talentless, pushed for an Australian-made alternative, *Cleopatra*. These moves were taken almost in defiance of his father who at one stage wanted to call the new publication the *Women's Monthly*. As *Cleo's* founder editor, Ila Buttrose argued that this title was inadvisable. She later explained away an article on female masturbation as a medical science report.

Cleo's first issue appeared in October 1972, in tandem with

Whitlam's equally glossy fare and thriving on many of the same expectations. *Cleo's* nude male centrefolds, beginning with Jack Thompson, proved to be as revealing as 'Open Government'. *Cleo's* covers began as standardised models' faces with the relevant make-up instructions inside. Early articles deal with encounter groups, massage, leather and suicide; drag queens and lesbians followed in the first six months.

As *Cleo's* editor, Ila Buttrose developed the personalised approach which she later used on the *Weekly*. Her *Cleo* editorials were chatty, posing questions rather than offering firm answers, except that she and the Packers knew that their typical reader would be 'an intelligent woman who's interested in everything that's going on, the type of person who wants a great deal more out of life. Like us, certain aspects of Women's Lib appeal to you but you're not aggressive about it. And again like us, you're all for men — as long as they know their place. I think it's difficult being a woman these days.'¹³

Cleo advertised itself in the *Women's Weekly* as 'what makes a woman more of a woman', implying that women need not be full-time mothers and wives.

After four years of publication, *Cleo's* then editor believed that her magazine had helped to change the situation of its particular audience:

Today, the only thing that has changed about *Cleo* and its readers is that women are more self-aware than they were then. They know more about their own sexuality, their bodies and how to care for them; they're more assertive at home and at work, and they've achieved a sense of confidence about their own worth and abilities they didn't have before.¹⁴

Cleo preached a commercialised version of liberation and it engrossed women in a greater awareness of their image as presentable and physical objects. Far from encouraging women to become citizens, *Cleo* shepherded them behind self-awareness and into a flashier world of fantasy than ever dreamed of by the *Weekly*.

In manipulating its way around its mindless tasks, *Cleo's* sales of just under 250,000 did very much better than *Cosmopolitan's* 160,000. *Cleo* fulfilled the Packers' expectations by holding advertising revenues within the Consolidated Press group. This success highlighted the fact that something had to be done to the *Weekly*. Ila Buttrose became that something.

VI

Ila Clare Buttrose was born on 17 January 1942. She went to work as a

copy girl on the *Women's Weekly* in 1957 and two years later she travelled with Princess Alexandria through Queensland for the Sydney *Daily Telegraph*. By 1967, Buttrose was women's editor for the *Daily* and *Sunday Telegraph* when she won a fashion contest and a trip to Expo 67 in Canada from where she went to England and a job on *Woman's Own*. She returned to her old job in Sydney, became foundation editor of *Cleo* in 1972, editor of the *Women's Weekly* in March 1975, and publisher of both magazines in 1976. She left the Packer group early in 1981 to become editor-in-chief of the *Daily* and *Sunday Telegraph* which Rupert Murdoch had bought from the Packers in 1972.

To have got so far so quickly would have made Buttrose the subject of a feature article or two. Instead, she made herself into a public figure, recipient of an OBE and voted the most admired woman in Australia. The rock group Cold Chisel wrote a song about her and an ex-advertising director entered her portrait, unsuccessfully, for the 1980 Archibald Prize. Other media interviewed her and sought her opinions. She began to introduce television programmes in addition to her commercials for the *Weekly*. She presented prizes, made speeches and delivered memorial lectures. Everything about her became news. Her social life was reported, her favourite restaurants noted and her office described in detail. Through her column she let readers into innocent secrets of her childhood such as when she had read *Anne of Green Gables*; that she had had her teeth straightened; and how she lost her ballerina dress when her family's house burnt down. Magically, this ordinary child grows up to become an executive who is driven to work in a Mercedes and who recommends that her readers live as she does and 'have a holiday at Surfers, and if you can, take a ride in a helicopter!'¹⁵

To think of the *Australian Women's Weekly* in the late 1970s was to think of Ila Buttrose, who had personalised the magazine through her lispng television advertisements and her limp editorials. The lisp and the limpness were exaggerated to mask her workaholicism. So much of Buttrose's private life became public property that it was hard to remember that she scattered the details about in order to conceal the substance of her job. What marked her editorship was the quest for new target audiences. She knew that women's magazines succeed only if they 'become the trade press to the biggest trade in the world. The trade of being a woman.'¹⁶

That trade began in the United States around the 1920s and it developed in Australia after the 1940s. Its spread depended on the changes in demand which stimulated and serviced the extension of women's work from unpaid, farm and domestic labour to poorly paid office and factory employment on top of housework. Women took jobs to pay for the appliances which helped them to have the time to go out to work. A sample of the issues for the last two weeks in June showed that both the

Weekly and *New Idea* almost trebled the percentage of their total advertising taken by household appliances and furniture in the second half of the 12 years between 1969 and 1980. As women spent less time at home so they were obliged to buy in more of the services which they had previously produced.

Hence, the money costs of reproducing labour power rose to consume those things which corporations overproduced in their battles against their competitors. Within capitalism's necessarily contradictory cycle of overproduction and wasteful consumption, the range of women's magazines gained their special importance by altering social attitudes as required by shifts in the demand for female labour and by advertising new products to buy.

Buttrose was after more than a larger share of the advertising that traditionally went to women's magazines. Her new woman had wider interests than house and garden and she had the money to satisfy these demands. The *Weekly* won some advertisements for cigarettes and travel but there was almost no attempt to sell cars, for example, through its pages. The frequency of advertisements for alcohol increased only marginally during the decade. The largest single category of ads was still for food and beauty products although both had declined as a percentage of the *Weekly's* advertising.

One problem was that while women as consumers were changing, the male advertising executives were not. Buttrose frequently hit out at the prejudices of advertisers who "find it difficult to accept the fact that the modern woman just does not spend her day in preoccupied contemplation of the virtues of one laundry detergent over another".¹⁷ For over five years she fought to change these assumptions and to win a wider range of advertisers. Before the end, she admitted defeat in a sexist advertising campaign to sell the *Weekly's* readership to agencies. Under the banner heading "How to get more women" were sections titled "Picking them up faster", "Entertainment expenses", "Satisfaction guaranteed" and "Vital statistics".

Her attempts to increase the *Weekly's* advertising rates were weakened by three factors in addition to the narrow outlook of the agencies. First, there was competition from colour television which could outshine coloured pages for the display of food and soft furnishings. Secondly, it was possible for agencies to package a readership similar to that of the *Weekly* from a number of magazines and at a lower cost than through the *Weekly*. Finally, the biggest growth was in the service sector which rarely advertised at all. Buttrose's readership increased during 1980 but so did costs, and at a faster rate than did revenues.

The *Weekly's* task of packaging women for resale to merchandisers was compounded by Buttrose's success at expanding the content of women's magazines. The *Weekly's* readership did not decline so much as

become more discriminating. In its efforts to satisfy all tastes, the *Weekly* was in danger of snapping the links between the over 40-year-old non-metropolitan, housebound wife and the under 40, city-dwelling employee.

Buttrose made the magazine more physically attractive and emphasised its news content. Political and social changes were reported, though frequently from a human interest angle; and family aspects of the Granville train disaster got 16 pages. Sales of the Darwin cyclone issue exceeded 900,000 in January 1975. Said Buttrose: "Good news stories always sell well."¹⁸ Two months later, an issue with a bald parrot on the cover found only 723,000 buyers. By 1979, the *Weekly* was offering news in its own right and not just as a human interest follow-up to stories which had appeared already in the daily press or on the electronic media. When Elvis Presley died two pages were ripped out to meet the news deadline and to cater for all those readers to whom Presley had been the King.

Murdoch's *New Idea* demonstrated how far down market it was from the *Women's Weekly* when it printed an exclusive six-page special (28 June 1980) on "The Man Who Stole Elvis Presley's Wife" which began: I lay naked in a motel bedroom, waiting for the most desirable woman in the world.

The bathroom door opened and there she stood, beautiful in a see-through nightdress, her long blonde hair tumbling over her shoulders.

Suddenly a wave of panic and insecurity hit me. For the first time I realised the magnitude of what I was going to do.

I was about to make love to the wife of Elvis Presley.

Deciding what picture to use as the cover illustration is one of the deeper mysteries of the magazine trade. A comparison of the *Weekly's* covers from the 1960s with those from the 1970s shows several large shifts in the choice of images employed to attract buyers. The only exception was British royalty who were used about the same number of times in the 1960s as in the 1970s although there was a slight increase after Buttrose took charge: "There's Prince Charles," she observed late in 1979, "an interesting man, but the Royal Family tends to run in cycles. At the moment, because of the Mountbatten funeral, they're good again but they're not infallible."¹⁹ A closer look at the use of British royalty on the covers of the *Weekly* shows just how variable their appeal has been perceived to be. In 1961, they appeared 15 times; in 1962, only twice. In 1977, they were used 13 times, and in 1978 only three times. And they are used only when they are already in the news because of a marriage, a divorce, an anniversary or a tour. There is no sign that the British Royal Family has been a drawcard in its own right. The two big declines in cover usage under Buttrose's command were of models and animals. The number of foreign royals rose while screen and stage stars almost doubled their appearances to 13 times a year. Buttrose believed that film stars were