

“very effective. Sophia Loren is almost always good, and while I used to be very keen on Elizabeth Taylor I discovered a year back that she doesn’t always work.”²⁰ The major innovation on Buttrose’s covers was her use of ‘stars’ and she made herself one of their number.

If a women’s magazine were to succeed it had, in Buttrose’s view, to ‘create a friendship’ between the staff and their readers. Her personalisation of the magazine was intended, in part, to restore ‘that unique, individual bond’²¹ of friendship which had existed under Fensom. Buttrose backed up her television commercials with as many live appearances as possible, even at quite small gatherings. She became one of those superstars whom she used on her covers, until she filled many of the functions of minor royalty, opening public events, announcing winners and fumbling fresh platitudes.

A public knowledge of Buttrose’s divorce could be used to make her appear vulnerable and thus bring her closer to the lives and fears of so many of her readers. In 1976, Buttrose’s situation as a lone parent was shared by 150,000 women and 20,000 men, 10 per cent of women of her age were separated or had been divorced. Her success as a mother with a career made her an ‘ideal’ for all those women who had wanted a job and a family, but ended up with a full-time family plus an ill-paid part-time job, and who could never look quite as well made up as Ita did and never earned enough money to employ servants. Whatever envy existed towards her was more than drowned in a fantasy of admiration for the one woman who obviously had made it in a man’s world. Her friendship with nearly two million women was as close as many of them would ever get to their longed-for success. Ita tried to appeal to a generation of failed Ita Buttroses for whom part-time employment was proving less a path towards liberation than a slide into a more intense alienation where even Ita’s plastic-coated paper friendship might be worth considering.

The *Weekly* avoided the economic necessity for women to have jobs and largely ignored the fact that one wage was rarely enough to pay off the Australian dream. Instead, jobs were almost always written about as ‘careers’, undertaken for fulfilment, happiness or adventure as in the story of Margaret Rose, aged 35, mother of four and employee of an international cosmetics company who looked ‘terrific by nine am’ after only five to 10 minutes putting on her make-up, and with her priorities of ‘husband and children first’.²² The *Weekly*’s scrambled attitudes towards working mothers were held in place by the fact that the jobs of most women were not like that of Margaret Rose, still less like that of Ita Buttrose. Just as the *Weekly* ran two sets of recipes — one from its test kitchen in full colour and another lot sent in by readers in black and white — so it depended upon its ability to gloss over the differences between the drudgery of work at home or on the job and the excitements of rushing to keep appointments by switching jets at the last minute. The *Weekly* filled

the distance between these opposing ways of life with practical advice and sustaining myths. It could not dwell on the boredom in life since its own success more than ever called forth glamour and all those illusions manufactured along with the terrible realities of work.

If it is wrong to write about Australia since the 1930s without reference to the *Women’s Weekly*, it is equally true that the *Weekly* is as biased as any other source of information, especially for what it leaves out. It never deals with the often appalling conditions under which women work on assembly lines, or with the strikes they wage to improve their situation. The exceptions to this neglect of militant women were articles in praise of their anti-worker activities: from Western Australia in July 1977 came news of WASP, the Women’s Anti-Strike Party; later that year, the wives of Whyalla strikers were reported as marching to make their husbands return to work. Then an article about women trade unionists concentrated on the sexism of male workers and ignored the behaviour of their common employers. This article included a profile of Edna Ryan, but suppressed many of the things which allow her to surpass the *Weekly*’s notion of success. Edna’s life was complete in ways that Ita’s could never approach.

Edna Nelson was born in the inner Sydney suburb of Pyrmont in 1904; the 10th of 12 children. Despite economic disadvantages and a none too sober father, she had the support of a mother whom she remembers as having ‘the cheerfulness of a soldier in battle’. Edna won a bursary to Fort Street High School but left before matriculating after she heard one of her three brothers complain about educating her since ‘She’ll only get married’. So she went to work in an office and developed as a political activist in the Communist Party and later in the Labor Party, for which she stood twice as a candidate in State elections and once for the Senate. She had married and raised three children before being widowed in 1959. She became an alderman for many years and was a militant unionist until she retired in 1972. When the women’s movement began in 1969-70, Edna Ryan became more active than ever and led the equal pay case for the Women’s Electoral Lobby before the Arbitration Commission in 1974. As a result of that work she co-authored a book, *Gentle Invaders*, about Australian women at work since 1788. Although she welcomed the equal pay decision, she realised that it was only a small step and that there ‘is no benign power which will dispense equality — the realisation will come from active participation and struggle’.²³ When she went to the 1975 International Women’s Year Conference in Mexico she felt as if she were on a ‘binge’ since all the things she had battled to achieve for nearly 60 years were being taken seriously there. Edna’s wisdom and compassion both result from a life that has never been easy. She is a remarkable person but perhaps no more so than scores of others, who keep fighting to better the conditions of their fellows. ‘Mum Shirt’ Smith, Aboriginal

campaigner and one-person welfare agency in and around Redfern; the late Bessie Guthrie, artist, life-long resident of Glebe, publisher, campaigner for women prisoners and founder of Australia's first women's refuge, Elsie; these are two other Sydney women who have got some recognition for their work, which is far from being what the *Weekly* depicts as a "career".

The *Weekly*, too, cut down on the workers producing it. After August 1979, a new binding machine more than doubled the rate of production to 15,000 copies an hour. Buttrose enthused that "so automated is the entire paper making and printing process that a customer who picks up a copy of the *Weekly* at the newsagency becomes the first person to handle our glossy coat since it was a tree in Finland. . . ." ²⁴ In a further effort to reduce costs, the *Weekly* closed some of its interstate offices, sacked clerical staff and journalists in Sydney and published more syndicated material from the United States. This last kind of de-labourisation can be disguised further by "Australiansing", the copy so that San Francisco becomes Sydney in a short story while 30,000 is reduced to 3000 for a feature article. As Kerry Packer, proprietor of *Cleo* and the *Weekly*, observed: "If you want to increase profitability the number of employees must be kept under constant scrutiny by management." ²⁵

VII

In the *Weekly's* series on "Women and Work", a local journalist asked: Is this 1980 or 1958 we see before us? Women in spike heels and pinched waists giggling girlishly over the rogue male, the liberation movements of the 60s and 70s remote as childhood nightmares — what on earth was all the agony about?

If you take the optimistic view and ignore the possibility of nuclear holocaust, the 1980s could well pitch us deeper into a major international recession. The betting is that what will be is the way we were. The backlash is here. ²⁶

It is true that expanding employment opportunities helped to set the women's movement in motion by the late 1960s and that rising part-time work has slowed down the feminist drive since the later 1970s. It is also true that the improvements which women won in the 1970s were mainly to public and legal matters and that there are fewer signs that men learnt how to enjoy women's company. At the turn of the century Edward Dyson began one of his stories with a statement that still just about sums up sexual relations in Australia: "Er man learns er bit 'bout women in er crib like this, 'n ther more he learns, ther more he learns his confidence in beer." ²⁷

What have changed are some of the attitudes which women have towards themselves and each other. Their acceptance of an active female sexuality has not always denied the adoption of an activist response to legal rights and equal opportunities. Indeed, women's struggles are now the front line of battle to halt the further direction of state expenditures towards the rich and the corporations. Moreover, resilient levels of feminist thinking survive, sometimes in unexpected areas. Nuns developed a feminist theology, requested ordination and prided themselves on having been the first women to live independently of men. In 1974, Elizabeth Rennie took over as editor of Melbourne's Roman Catholic weekly, the *Advocate*. During International Women's Year, six women were honoured with Australian postage stamps and one result of the women's movement has been a start on the rewriting of Australian history to include women: not just the famous, freaks and firsts, but the continuing contribution which millions of unnamed women, black and white, have given towards the making of Australia. This rewriting has highlighted the fact that Elizabeth Macarthur, and not her husband John, should have her picture on the two dollar note as the founder of Australia's wool industry.

In May 1974, Joan Child became the first woman ever to represent the Labor Party in the House of Representatives; she was only the fourth woman in the lower house and the first since 1969. Women did better in the Senate which has had at least one woman member since 1943. The 1980 elections brought more women to the Commonwealth parliament than at any time in its history when they won three seats in the House of Representatives; after 1 July 1981, there were 10 women senators. Though women had little success inside the federal Parliamentary Labor Party, they did better with the Whitlam government's appointments. Liz Reid was his special advisor on women's affairs until she resigned in protest late in 1975; Elizabeth Ewart and Mary Gaudron got Arbitration Commission appointments, while Hilda Rolfe joined the Australian Wool Corporation. Senator Dame Margaret Gilroy became a cabinet minister in the Fraser government; the second in 75 years of Federation.

If the appointment of such women went beyond the token representation of the past it was still far from evidence of social equality. Indeed, the careers of women like Senator Susan Ryan, or Jan Marsh at the ACTU, or Professor Leonie Kramer underline how few women hold any kind of public office in Australia. Only three States have had women ministers; there has never been a woman member of the ACTU executive; no female vice-chancellor at a university; no woman executive director in any of Australia's largest corporations. While radical feminists can reflect the goal of success in these power structures, their exclusive control by males is further proof, if any were needed, that Australia has moved more slowly than have many other parts of the world. Parliament and the public service remain games for the boys.