

“Wild Jill”: Jill Roe and the Reshaping of Australian Women’s History’
Australian Women’s History Network - Special Panel
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Speaker: Professor Mary Spongberg, UTS

I first met Jill Roe in 1988/89 –Mitchell library -20th century studies of sexuality.

Jill was on a panel with Stephen Garton, who I believe opened the panel with a rather hair raising paper on an inmate of Callan Park, who had engaged in what could only be described as extreme masturbatory activities. Never one to hold a poker face, Jill looked more and more aghast and Stephen’s paper went on, and when he finished, Jill got up and did something that my children would call, ‘classic Jill’, she totally stole the show from Stephen with a perfectly timed, executed and on the money quote from her beloved Miles Franklin.

I next met Jill in 1996 at my new job in the MH dept at MQ. I had been there a little over a year, and was still quite green. When I arrived the dept had about 30 staff, 3 of whom were women. Me, who was replacing the late Carolyn Alloport, Portia Robinson, who had accumulated so much leave she was never really there, and Jill who was at Harvard. I was completely culture shocked as I had come from the little bijou cottage that was Women’s Studies at the University of Sydney in the mid-1990s. This was one of the most blokely environments I had ever experienced. I swear to God, they used to start dept meetings with Lady and gentlemen. Unsurprisingly I was very happy to lay eyes on Jill. And she was also quite happy to see me, although also somewhat cautious. She had been misinformed that my PhD was in women’s studies. Well the relief on her face when I told her that I had a PhD in History was palpable. I was a real historian, well I was never really sure whether I was really a real historian to Jill, but I was close enough. I always think that Jill saw herself as a bit of a moral, as well as scholarly, guardian for me, and I know she was very pleased to know that I am no longer working on venereal disease, but on Jane Austen and Jacobitism.

We established a fairly good working relationship, although it was really the wonderful Max Kelly who truly bought us together. Jill and Max, were of course, major figures in the development of Urban history in Sydney, and had formed a deep friendship against

the backdrop of a seriously homophobic environment at MQ at the time. Although there were some wonderful men in Modern History such as David Christian and Michael Roberts, the department was factionalised by the religious politics of post-war Australia as well as the sexual politics. I learned many things about both during my friendship with Max, as well as Jill. Max had been my saviour when I had first arrived at MQ, a touch of 1960s London Glamour amid the port and cardigan brigade. He was witty, urbane and really made a girl glam up when she was in public with him. Max would often ensure we would have a meal or drink together with Jill and I became part of that tight little group, much to my surprise and delight. But it was really his untimely death that drew us close and although we both very sad at his loss, we also realized that this shared grief was a very strong element in the early days of our friendship.

As I stayed longer in the department I came to learn and experience some of the more pointed sleights and discrimination that Jill must have endured since the late 60s. I also learned as we put together Jill's Women in Australian History course, what a pioneer Jill had been with Camp Ink and Women's Lib and how significant the department at Macquarie had been, to both Gay Liberation (although maybe as a more negative force) and Women's Lib.

Our friendship deepened as we worked to maintain the department in the wake of the Howard Government's cuts to education. We needed to save the History department and this really became Jill's mission when she returned from Harvard. The department, which had been quite large by contemporary standards was cut from 30 to 7 in a very short space of time. I know Jill spent much time lobbying the then VC, Prof Di Yerbury and indeed anyone else who would listen to ensure that Modern History survived, and was not merged into Ancient History, and the fact that it did, was largely as a result of Jill's unfailing energy and commitment to the discipline.

When Jill became Head of Dept she set about doing her best to regrow the discipline. Although Jill did not appoint all the staff that have come on in the last decade, her retirement in 2002, allowed for the possibility of 3 new positions and we were able to give permanent appointments to Michelle Arrow, Alison Holland, and Hsu-Ming Teo, and I hope they won't mind me saying this, but it did really take three people to replace Jill. She also lobbied our Dean, Christie Slade hard to ensure we got a Professor too, which is how Angela Woollacott came to the department. So it really took four people to

replace Jill. Jill was also responsible for teaching many of the real stars of the department, Judith Allen, Judith Godden, Bridget Griffin Foley and Lisa Featherstone and I am sure many others I do not know about. Although Tanya Evans was my postdoc, it was really Jill who was responsible for her coming to MQ, through her connections with Pat Thane. Many of the current staff at MQ owe their jobs to Jill in one way or another.

Not that Jill actually left MQ in 2002. Rather she continued to build her legacy, by finishing the book on Miles, to great acclaim. By leading the Pen Anthology Project, also to great acclaim, by working on the ADB to great acclaim, and by continuing to provide vital leadership and advice to the dept, to the AHA and to History Council, really up until about 18 months before she died.

There were many things I would like to say about working with Jill. It was never boring for one thing. Jill was always unfailing generous and kind and collegial. Even when she was being treated with real disdain from certain male colleagues, she would be polite will still being indignant.

And she was always full of surprises. Jill managed to hardly mention by first pregnancy and I assumed she had little interest in it. But when my daughter Tallulah was born, she appeared on my doorstep with a much-treasured LP record (yes they still exist) of Tallulah Bankhead doing spoken word pieces as a gift for Tallulah. I reminded my Tallulah about this when we were driving to PB to see Jill (and accumulating driving hours so Tallulah could get her Ps) We were both touched by her kindness and it created a special bond with Jill that ensured Tallulah was always ready to make that trip with me.

I had the privilege of working with Jill on a number of her projects. I taught her groundbreaking women in Australian History with her in 1998 and helped her write the Linkage project that supported the Pen Anthology. If it is true that I created Spongberg enterprizes, as she called it, within the dept, it also true that I was just following her lead.

The vibrant department of Modern History we see at MQ today, is Jill's greatest legacy and I know how every proud she was of its achievements. When you look at its areas of specialization, they are all areas that Jill championed and made her own. I also believe

that as she wrote the book on Miles she not only created the gold standard for historical/literary biographies, she also inspired a whole generation of scholars to work on Australian cultural history, at Macquarie and beyond.

Jill was a founding member of staff of University and loved the institution, indeed she loved it even more than she loved Harvard, which she also loved a lot. Jill really internationalized Australian History, at Harvard, and with Miles book, and indeed with her vast friendship network of historians such as Pat Thane and Judith Allen across the world. Jill was one of the most funny, unfailingly generous and warm colleagues I have ever had, I miss her so much, and I know that the department and the discipline misses her even more.

I know Jill would want me to finish with some Miles so as she said of Miles Franklin in her ADB entry, she **proved** 'a real hard **doer**', as they used to say up country.