How has a feminist revision of the legend changed historiographic constructions of gender?

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Ann Curthoys identifies the search for a national historiography as a ‘national non-imperial identity’, beginning after World War II. The search for this ‘national non-imperial identity’ can be seen in Russel Ward’s attempt to define a national identity in The Australian Legend. As Curthoys notes, it was difficult for many to think ‘beyond the framework developed by a white nationalistic settler consciousness’ and Russel Ward’s The Australian Legend falls within this framework.

Since its initial publication in 1958 The Australian Legend has been hailed as a milestone and castigated for its lack of analysis and concentration on the ‘bushman’ as the archetypal Australian. Ward would, twenty years later, defend The Australian Legend as having ‘never purported to be in any sense a general or balanced history of Australia’, but an attempt to construct the ‘national identity’ and Ward saw this as originating in the ‘bush’. For Ward, this archetypal Australian, was white, from the bush, most likely a convict and most definitely male. This construction sits at an uncomfortable juxtaposition with a country where there was a high literacy rate among women; 81 per cent of New South Welshwomen by 1861 could read and a country that was one of the first to give women the vote and stand for Parliament. As two historians have ascertained; ‘Australia manifests itself as such a strangely hybrid place, containing, often conterminously, some of the most progressive and repressive patterns in western democratic/capitalistic development.’ It is precisely this

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2 Ibid., p. 27.
4 Alan Atkinson, “‘He filled us full of laughter’: contact and community in Australian experience,” in Cultural History in Australia, ed. Richard White and Hsu Ming-Teo, (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press Ltd, 2003), p. 45.
conundrum that both elevates *The Australian Legend* to myth-like proportions and narrows its worldview by omitting the ‘other’.

For all its male centricity however, *The Australian Legend* provided a stepping off point by which subsequent historians could deconstruct the *Legend*. Nowhere was this more ably and vehemently taken up than by feminist and cultural historians. Women are by definition, not so much absent from *The Australian Legend* but subsumed within it. This has allowed historians a platform to explore the gender politics of Australia, most notably, but not limited to, the colonial period of the nineteenth century. Feminist and cultural historians have constructed not a female mirror image of Ward’s legendary bushman but rather explored the nuances of being a woman in the harsh frontiers of the Australian bush and on into the urbanised cities. In so doing the feminist revision has presented women as being very much at the heart of nation building rather than on its periphery.

The 1970s saw the beginnings of a reworking of *The Australian Legend* by feminist historians which grew out of a worldwide questioning by feminist historians of the absence of women from the accepted history of nations. Joan Scott in a review of the proliferation of women’s history in the 1970s identified a number of strands of methodology beginning with the ‘her-story’ line of inquiry that posited women’s history as part of the line of historical inquiry into events such as labour participation as one example.\(^7\) Within the ‘her-story’ line there also existed a sub-strata that put women at the centre of the debate and dealt exclusively with ‘female agency’.\(^8\) While Scott was surveying mainly the work of American historians, her analysis applies equally to Australian historians and suggests a worldwide trend in approach to women’s history that had its genesis in the 1970s. Feminist historians in Australia seem to have particularly initially embraced the ‘her-story’ approach that ‘substitutes women for men but [it] does not rewrite conventional history’ albeit giving equal weight to the ‘personal, subjective experience’ as to the ‘public and political’ spheres.\(^9\)

A second approach identified by Scott was the increased popularity of ‘social history’ that drew from other disciplines such as sociology and was ‘ultimately about processes or systems’ but ‘told through the lives of various groups who are ...subjects of the narrative.’\(^10\)

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\(^8\) Ibid., p. 148.

\(^9\) Ibid., p. 149.

\(^10\) Ibid., p.150.
Finally, a third approach identified by Scott, as well as being gender based also sought to put sex at the centre of women’s history by identifying sexual roles at certain times and cultures and how these ‘functioned to maintain the social order or to promote its change.’

First published in 1976, Miriam Dixson’s, *The Real Matilda* remains a pivotal tome in Australian feminist historiography. It is essentially a feminist response to a construction of the Australian identity solely along male lines. As Dixson stated: ‘Virtually all serious analysis of Australian character – or identity – is by males *about* males...males unknowingly use history as a way of ensuring their existence in the present is worthwhile, by exploring its roots in an allegedly national past.’

Thus the male centric version of history becomes the standard and thereby is able to omit the extraneous influence of any other group not fitting into, in this case, the dominant white, male paradigm. This was acutely so among Australian males, according to Dixson ‘Men *like* women less in Australia than any other community I know.’ Taken together with Anne Summers’ *Damned Whores and Gods Police*, readers of the 1970s could be forgiven for thinking that Australian women of the nineteenth century settler era had no agency, leading abject lives at the mercy of a male view of the world.

Dixson reviewed her initial work of *The Real Matilda*, like Ward, twenty years on. As Dixson stated, *The Real Matilda* was written from a ‘freudo-marxian’ approach to identity politics ‘premised on a profoundly left-wing approach congenial to my own.’ Influencing her work, among others ‘were aspects of convictism, aspects of the gender-culture of the pre-working class poor’ but it appears overriding these influences ‘a demographic imbalance on the frontier, a comparatively strong form of male bonding and a comparatively weak form of female bonding.’ While these were all valid aspects of her work, like many emerging feminist historians of the 1970s and indeed, even down to the present day, the negative view of female identity politics failed to take into consideration the evidence that did not immediately suit this particular paradigm. *The Real Matilda* and *Damned Whores* remain pivotal texts within feminist historiography, however, their assertions of women with little agency over their own lives have not gone unchallenged in the intervening decades.

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11 Ibid., pp. 152-153.
13 Ibid. P.17.
15 Ibid., p. 16.
First published in 1988, Portia Robinson’s *The Women of Botany Bay* was a groundbreaking work and an antidote to the victim mentality of Dixson and Summers, showing that convict women were not ‘whores’ but often skilled, literate women. Surveying the thousands of women who commenced their lives in Botany Bay as convicts, many of them ended as respectable and in some cases, wealthy, women of the fledgling colony. Many, such as Mary Long, cultivated landholdings alongside their husbands and when, as in Long’s case her husband died young, successfully continued to manage their holdings. Elizabeth Killett became ‘Lessee of the Tolls of Sydney Market in 1819 and later licensee of the Macquarie Arms.’ The successful business ventures of ex-convict women in the early days of the colony are even more remarkable when considering the demographics of early colonial society. In 1830, when the disparity in the sex ratio was at its highest there was a male/female ratio of 3.08 per 1000 of the population.

Deborah Oxley’s *Convict Maids* marked a significant change in the way colonial women were interpreted. First published in 1996, like Robinson’s *The Women of Botany Bay*, Oxley’s work presented convict women as having far more agency over their future than had first been thought; gone were the images of early colonial women either as ‘fallen’ or in the case of the daughters of the original convicts as tainted with the convict ‘stain’. Oxley’s work arguably goes further than Robinson’s, analysing the origins of and economic contribution of convict women in more detail. Oxley’s argument that despite the move away from convict women being of a uniform ‘criminal class’ of ‘damned whores’, there still existed challenges to be confronted on the make-up of female convicts; literacy levels, occupation and native place, whether from Ireland or England all played a part in the assessment of female convicts as contributors to the economic prosperity of the colony. Oxley’s conclusion that ‘convict women’s invisibility’ is a result of the ‘undue influence exercised by a number of nineteenth-century observers on twentieth-century historical thought’ is the trap that both Dixson and Summers fell into in their respective works.

17 Ibid., pp. 242-243.
20 Ibid., p. 198.
Joy Damousi has taken the so-called ‘depravity’ of convict women in another direction positing it as reaction against the female constraints of the day. As Damousi states, female ‘depravity’ was very much a subjective issue ‘in which male observers constructed their own subjectivities as white, male and middle class in relation to convict women.’\textsuperscript{21} Citing the case of one John Hutchinson, warden at the Hobart factory in 1842, who, on investigating some rather raucous behaviour exhibited by the female inhabitants late at night was shocked to find five women, naked, laughing and dancing. Hutchinson’s reaction was typical of the middle-class male of the time since laughing and dancing within the confines of the factory were punishable offences.\textsuperscript{22} For women incarcerated in the factory, however, this represented an ‘undermining’ of the power exerted over them. It is perhaps this version of a convict woman that comes closest to \textit{The Australian Legend}. Here is the female version of the ‘larrikin’ in all her naked glory representing the anti-authoritarian nature of \textit{The Australian Legend}.

Damousi also noted the shift in attitude once the female convicts became free; language changed and for women the freedom of the colony denied them while within the confines of goal or female factory reasserted itself within the family unit which ‘gave them a sense of pride and affirmation.’\textsuperscript{23} This certainly ties in with the arguments of Robinsons and Oxley that not all convict women, or women of the nineteenth century settler society generally were either ‘whores’ or ‘doormats’. It gives back to these women agency and self responsibility that the concentration on the male story of settler Australia has largely ignored.

It is arguably in the area of women’s writing that has largely been ignored in the assessment of settler society that has revealed some surprising revelations in the contact between settler and indigenous peoples. While there is no denying the violence of settler society against the indigenous population it is in women’s writings that a far more nuanced approach can be detected in some instances.

Patricia Grimshaw and Julie Evans focussed on three settler women; Rosa Campbell Praed, Mary Bundock and Katie Langloh Parker, all three of whom were acute observers of the impact of settler society on indigenous people and although in modern times it may be

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 64.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 66.
observed that they could at times be seen as paternalistic in their writings it is important to remember that they were very much products of the views of the time.

The three women, whom the paper focuses, as Grimshaw and Evans pointed out, undoubtedly added to the understanding of settler society and not always to the positive side. Katie Parker in response to sceptic criticisms of her gathering of indigenous legends as being too poetic to have come from indigenous minds replied that ‘it is hard having taken their country, not so bloodlessly either as people believe, we should arrogate to ourselves their own poetical thoughts.’ Colonial women such as Katie Parker seemed only too aware of the frontier violence; however, their observations were suppressed in keeping with the ‘incipient Australian nationalism of the 1890s...’

Meg Vivers’ researched the writings of women in remote areas of New South Wales and Queensland that not only revealed the harshness of life in frontier areas during the 19th century but also showed significant contact between white and black women that could contribute to further understanding of settler and indigenous relations as well as indigenous customs. As Vivers argued, women’s writing, largely overlooked by male historians, including Henry Reynolds, has much to add to the understanding of frontier conflict; however, neglecting this avenue of inquiry significantly narrows the field.

Graeme Davidson’s, The Use and Abuse of Australian History presents another line of inquiry into female roles in the form of ‘Family History’, which as he posits, was originally based on a patriarchal line of inquiry, most notably as an example the The Women’s Pioneer Society of Australasia, founded in 1928 and drawing its inspiration from male pioneers almost exclusively. While this has remained largely the case, the tracing of the family tree fell largely to women and it is here that the nuances of family life in nineteenth century Australia have often been teased out. Mary Durack and Judith Wright both wrote extensive histories of their respective families and in the case of Judith Wright in particular came to be both pridelful and critical of her family’s pioneering life.

25 Ibid. p. 95.
27 Ibid., p. 96.
First published in 1959, Wright’s *The Generations of Men*, has been revised several times and by the 1980s Wright was coming to terms in a far more critical way of her family’s dispossession of the indigenous peoples. As Davidson opines, ‘It is regrettable that recent feminist historians have so far given little critical attention to these grandmothers of Australian women’s history for their careers offer subtle insights into the limits of intellectual independence among the daughters of the squattocracy.’

One of the aims of *Debutante Nation*, a collection of papers focussed on the 1890s as a pivotal decade in Australian history, was to contest the ‘legend’ of the 1890s as being much more than the decade in which the nationalist character of the *The Australian Legend* was ‘unified’ and formed and as such to ‘contest the unity that has been assigned to them, a unity that has *depended* upon the exclusion of women and the repression of the feminine.’

Originally published in 1986 and reprinted in *Debutante Nation*, Marilyn Lake’s *The Politics of Respectability* argued that ‘the gender factor’ was ‘obscured’ in Australian historical discourse by the innate acceptance of the male viewpoint as the standard and the ‘Lone Hand’ as the ideal of masculinity exemplified by the *Bulletin*, a masculinity that rejected domesticity as emasculating.

While the *Bulletin* was undoubtedly misogynistic and proud of its belief in white superiority, its influence can be overstated especially if taken in isolation. John Docker’s response to Lake’s article appears a little more even-handed in addressing the touted gender bias of Australia in the 1890s. Docker presents an interesting counterpoint to Lake’s view as he positions the 1890s in general within a radical nationalist framework with a feminist perspective as articulated by Lake becoming another re-writing of *The Australian Legend*. As Docker states, the ideals formulated by Ward were attached to the quintessential bushman; irreverent humour, mateship, independent and anti-authoritarian are just a few of the qualities attributed to that bushman, an ideal that should be but was not emulated by the urbanised population. That this ideal is seemingly naturally male is problematic, however, as

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29 Davidson, *The Use and Abuse of Australian History*, pp. 95-96.
30 Davidson, *The Use and Abuse of Australian History*, p. 93.
Docker asserts while the power base centred around a male legend, feminist historians have, following the path of ‘othering’ vested power in the female model to the exclusion of all else. Indeed, the *Bulletin* while representing a male centric approach does not represent the entire body of 1890s gender relations.  

Marilyn Lake espoused ‘It is time that gender became a central category of all historical analysis. For just as women’s history cannot be fruitfully written without reference to men, neither can men’s history be properly written without reference to men’s relations with women.’ While Lake’s statement remains the ideal and arguably whether that position has now been reached, it remains that without a comprehensive reflection on the work of feminist historians of earlier decades, history without reference to gender would be unlikely to be achievable.

The ‘add-women-and-stir’ approach has eventually given way to a more integrated approach to evaluating a national identity. *Creating the Nation*, published in 1996 attempted to bring all strands together and take the construction of a national identity into the twentieth century. In doing this the authors have also included the ‘non-white, non-western, non-independent’ women, in this case mostly indigenous women of Australia in the narrative as a further re-evaluation of national identity. The premise of this work is in essence to ‘open(s) up the possibility of solidarity between women in common struggles for freedom from men’s personal and military violence.’

The feminist re-evaluation of *The Australian Legend* since its initial publication in 1958 has re-defined the boundaries of historical discourse in the intervening years. Constant re-evaluation of the roles of women in the building of the nation has revealed women who were central to the success of settler Australia. The ‘damned whores’ of early settler Australia have been comprehensively rehabilitated to reveal women of intelligence and tenacity at the heart of colonial society. These women, their daughters and grand-daughters became successful business people, writers and a myriad of other occupations. The notion of early colonial women as being illiterate and desultory has gone. Along with this they have also in some instances thrown a different light on the interaction between indigenous and

34 Ibid. p.19.
European women and revealed interesting insights into indigenous culture that has been largely ignored by historians.

For all its critics, The Australian Legend remains an essential text in the understanding of colonial history and the construction of a ‘national identity’. Arguably, without The Australian Legend as a stepping off point, there may have been no review of female participation in the colony, no review of settler and indigenous interaction, no review of urban and rural dominance. In essence, The Australian Legend’s weaknesses come to comprise its strengths. For feminist historians, The Australian Legend’s omitting of female participation in the construction of the ‘national identity’ has allowed and encouraged feminist historians to ably explore the role of women in colonial Australia and in doing so added to the rich layer of Australian history.

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