

BRINGING THE FIGHT

**A firebrand feminist's life of defiance
and determination**

MERLE THORNTON

with Melanie Ostell

 HarperCollins *Publishers*

The University of Queensland

Brisbane was hot and steamy. It was a state capital with a population of just over half a million people and it had one university. Many of its residents were suspicious of interlopers who came from the 'south', so it took a little time for us to become properly acclimatised.

Soon after Neil started at the University of Queensland in 1960 he made friends with Marxist economics lecturer Bruce McFarlane. At the time Bruce had been bequeathed a research grant from a bank to explore policy in the electricity production industry in Australia. After my failed sales job, Bruce took me on as a research assistant. I was thrilled – thrilled to be using my brain and once again to be on a university campus!

I began the project knowing nothing about power production per se, and economics was a subject in which I had no qualifications. But many years later, Humphrey McQueen mentioned the stir this very report caused:

The University of Queensland

A thousand miles to the south, the irrigators around Coleambally burnt Bruce in effigy after his report for the Commonwealth Bank on the economic efficiencies of the Snowy Mountains Scheme gave high marks to electricity production but a bad fail for the provision of water to keep Santamaria peasants voting for the DLP.

The work was interesting, but being on campus was everything. This was where conversations mattered, where ideas were given flesh and where change was possible. I was once again with my tribe – though things were a little different from what I was used to, especially at first.

There was a staff common room where assorted academics congregated, often informally, over morning or afternoon tea and even lunch. There was also a women's staff common room, and that was where I was directed. This women's room appeared to be used by ageing language teachers and it housed a couch and a large table around which lunchers might sit. I didn't like the look of this room at all; the conversation was thin and dull. I had been told the segregation was due to the thick cigarette smoke in the larger staff room, but I wasn't buying that for a moment.

Bugger that! I thought. *If most of the staff are in the main common room, I'm missing out on the most interesting conversations.* I didn't want to be excluded from anything any longer and decided to spearhead my own invasion.

With a prop book in hand, I stormed down the corridor towards the main staff common room and flung open the door. True, there was a heavy blue-grey fug of smoke, but there was also lots of chatter. A few of the older men greeted my entry with raised eyebrows; a couple of younger colleagues said hello. I smiled briefly and made a beeline for an empty chair in a corner. I sat, my heart thumping, and tried to settle my features into a beatific pose and confidently turn the pages of my book. I stayed there for another ten minutes until the bell rang, waiting for someone to give me a ticking off and boot me out of the room. No one did.

No one said anything, and nothing bad happened. Ha!

So I went back the next day, and the days after that, and soon I began having these wonderful conversations about history, theatre, aesthetics, and all those things we hold close.

After a week or two, Neil told me that the men had been too frightened to turn me out. I loved hearing that and hope there was some truth in it. But there were more heartening results. It didn't take long for other women to prefer to drop into this common room rather than the sterile cupboard we had been allocated. At first the men were mildly annoyed, then declared that if the women were going to use the main common room they didn't need a room of their own. That space was soon converted to offices. This was my first instance of direct action and it yielded results.

There had previously been a mind-numbing number of arcane rules pertaining to the common room, well understood by those in the know but only sometimes articulated to newcomers. Several years before our arrival, politics lecturer Tom Truman started at the university. At morning tea on his first day he went to the common room and sat down. Scarcely had he time to open his paper before he was tapped on the shoulder and warned off: 'That's Professor —'s seat.' Thankfully by the time we were on staff some reform must have been underway as no one to my knowledge had an allocated seat.

After working for Bruce, Fiori Rinaldi again came to my rescue. We had become friends by this stage and I had started writing a novel. To my surprise he asked me to take on tutoring philosophy in the university's Department of External Studies where he was a lecturer. 'You haven't got an honours degree in philosophy but you still have a major, and if you enrol for a master's in it, I still think you'd do a better job than most of those who are qualified.'

I mulled that over for a second before I jumped at it. I wasn't going to let this opportunity pass me by, and we could always do with a few more pounds and pence.

And so I became an academic.

There were only a handful of women teaching at the university then. I was friendly with economic historian Marion Gough and economist Helen Hughes, who would go on to work for the

Bringing the Fight

World Bank and become a prominent public figure. Yet Helen and I didn't always see eye to eye. Soon after my appointment she buttonholed me to say I should be helping Neil advance in his academic career rather than 'be in competition' with him. I didn't see things that way at all and told her so, explaining that in Canberra we decided to try for the second child we both wanted, but that once Neil had finished his fellowship and taken an academic job, I too hoped to resume a career. Helen's views were more conservative than I had first thought. She once said that the best thing she could do for women was to succeed in her own work, though I wondered how that was helpful for other women. Over time I came to believe that working women were largely of two types: those who tried to help and support other women overcome difficulties in gaining acceptance in paid work; and those who did what they could to secure their own acceptance, mostly by imitating the behaviour of men and becoming 'one of the boys'.

When might things change?

For a while there Neil and I shared an office in the department. I remember how other women marvelled at the fact that I enjoyed working with Neil as well as living with him, and I did. We made it work and he always found time to look after the kids. Harold had started school and Sigrid was sociable and happy to be with myself, Neil or at a daycare centre. We had the freedom to organise much of our own schedules around



A lovely shot of father and daughter – and how they adored each other – taken around 1966.

family and work, and we still socialised a fair bit, keen to find more like-minded people. Many new acquaintances worked at the university. Mary and Don Mannison were two of our first friends there; Mary taught at the teacher training college while Don was a UQ philosophy lecturer. Several years after that we warmed to Barbara and Peter Wertheim, fellow 'southerners'. We often spoke about how the academic standards of the university weren't quite up to snuff, and we recognised that we were in a position to improve things and raise the bar.

Truthfully, I was just so happy to be involved in university life again. In the early days of working there I was heard to say that, if necessary, I would pay to go out to work. Julia Ryan, who was a good friend, would remind me of those words some thirty years later. At the time she was married to Bruce McFarlane and she was also the daughter of Edna Ryan, an indefatigable feminist and campaigner in whose footsteps she would follow, as well as sister to Lyndall Ryan, a noted historian and academic. But it was true: I knew, and felt, that being out of the workforce for a significant period with young children destroyed one's professional status. And that was something I couldn't countenance.

An interesting fillip in being part of the Department of External Studies, where Neil was too, was the opportunity to travel. Neil did a good deal of roaming about the huge state of Queensland, as well as trips to Papua New Guinea to help those students studying remotely. I also visited PNG in the early 1960s

with Neil. We travelled from the city of Lae in the Morobe Province up to Kainantu in the Eastern Highlands and had a memorable journey to Rabaul, at the tip of New Britain, near active volcanoes. It was one of the most beautiful places I have ever visited but it was destroyed in 1994 when the volcanoes Tavurvur and Vulcan erupted.

Travelling was wonderful but being back on campus was better. I had missed the intensity of the conversations, the privilege of asking experts questions, of raising alternative arguments about certain issues. It mattered to me and it seemed important. So I was particularly delighted when Humphrey McQueen, who was a student of Neil's, started up the University of Queensland's own Free Thought Society while still an undergraduate in 1962. We thought Humphrey was fabulous – probing, energetic, intellectually challenging and playful. Also in this group were Bruce McFarlane, Ingrid Palmer (married to George Palmer and both of whom were close friends), Helen Hughes and others. Humphrey was also a member of the Rationalist Society, which met on Sunday evenings and, according to him, comprised mostly retired professors. From there, the younger group set up the Humanist Society and produced a little magazine; one of the students owned his own Roneo. These hand-cranked stencil machines rolled out newsletters and classroom handouts for nearly all public schools throughout the sixties and seventies.

The 'publications' were mostly in a purple ink, and the sharp tangy smell of spirits might linger for days. Xerox may have introduced office photocopying in the US in 1959 but it took decades before it became commonplace in Australia.

Humphrey did all the hard work in chairing meetings and writing and editing his own newsletter, *The Freethinker*, usually one foolscap sheet that also advertised forthcoming events. I remember racy topics included the licensing of prostitutes and checking the spread of venereal diseases, though I'm not sure how expert anyone was on that.

Unfortunately, the UQ Free Thought Society under Humphrey's aegis only lasted a year, but it's clear that in wanting to stir things up sometimes he got more than he bargained for.

Indeed, in the first half of that year I had my turn, along with Ingrid Palmer, in giving a talk at the Free Thought Society. And controversially (*mais oui*), we were speaking about contraception. Rather than a sexy-sounding title for the talk, however, we settled on 'Contraceptives and the Humanising of Women'. In our flyer we mentioned that we would include information on the new oral contraceptives – 'the pill' – now available to Australian women, though still difficult for many Queenslanders to access.

Two things about this talk stunned us: around eight hundred people turned up and they were nearly all young males. The old lecture theatre we had been allocated burst at the seams.

After all the rising benches had been occupied, students sat around our feet on the edge of the dais and spilled out of the door into the wide corridor outside where they could still hear the PA. What was clear was that the students knew little about contraception or how to access it if they were not married. Everyone was hoping for pragmatic advice.

The air was charged with expectation.

I spoke first on the huge difference reliable contraception made to the lives of women, especially if it didn't need to be inserted or applied before intercourse. I was so nervous, unsure what to say and how to say it. These were early days in talking about sex and nearly everyone was a novice. I do remember, it being 1962, feeling self-conscious that some of the young men on the floor before me had a clear vantage up my skirt, which billowed about a bit.

After the wave of stage fright had passed, I read a passage from *Anna Karenina*, where Dolly ruminates during a coach ride on childbirth and the difficulties in being so often pregnant:

At home, busy with the children, she never had time to think. But now, during this four-hour drive, all the previously repressed thoughts suddenly came crowding into her head, and she thought about the whole of her life as never before, and from all different sides. She herself found her thoughts strange [...]

'I can busy myself with Grisha now, but that's because I'm now free myself, I'm not pregnant, but if there's another child ...' And it occurred to her how incorrect the saying was about a curse being laid upon woman, that in pain she would bring forth children. 'Never mind giving birth, but being pregnant – that's the pain,' she thought, picturing her last pregnancy and the death of that last child [...] looking back at the whole of her life in those fifteen years of marriage, 'pregnancy, nausea, dullness of mind, indifference to everything, and, above all, ugliness.'

I looked up and the faces were interested and expectant, keen for me to get to the point. I flicked through the pages to the scene where Anna comes to see Dolly before bedtime. They talk about Vronsky and Anna having children in the future:

'He can rest easy about that, I won't have any more children.'

'How can you say you won't have any more? ...'

'I won't, because I don't want it.'

And, despite all her excitement, Anna smiled, noticing the naïve look of curiosity, astonishment and horror on Dolly's face.

'The doctor told me after my illness
.....'

'It can't be!' said Dolly, wide-eyed. For her it was one of those discoveries the consequences and conclusions of which are so enormous that for the first moment one feels only that it is impossible to grasp it all, but that one must think about it a great, great deal.

This discovery, which suddenly explained for her all those formerly incomprehensible families with only one or two children, called up in her so many thoughts, reflections and contradictory feelings that she was unable to say anything and only looked at Anna with wide-eyed astonishment. This was the very thing she had dreamed of that morning on her way there, but now, on learning that it was possible, she was horrified. She felt it was a much too simple solution of a much too complicated question.

'*N'est-ce pas immoral?*' was all she said, after a pause.

'Why? Consider, I have to choose between the two: either to become pregnant, meaning ill, or to be a friend, a companion for my husband, or the same as my husband,' Anna said.

Bringing the Fight

It sounds so chaste now, especially Tolstoy refusing to divulge what form of contraception this might be. But even with my lack of stagecraft and reading something as naive as this, the young men responded. They started asking questions. I told them straight up that good sex ‘wasn’t a matter of numbers but of quality’. I thought it was great they were so engaged until one student pressed me for what I meant by quality. Presumably he was fishing for intel about what made a woman happy in bed. ‘That isn’t our discussion topic for the day,’ I gently reminded him.

Next up it was Ingrid’s turn.

She spoke about the everydayness of contraceptives and then – *ta-da!* – held aloft a pill pack to display to the room. These were still early high-dose pills, though no longer in a jar but labelled clearly with each day of the week – so many days of oestrogen and a smaller number of progesterone – in a blister pack.

The crowd was *mesmerised*.

And then, with a grand sense of occasion, Ingrid punctured one of the pills from its home and raised a glass of water. People actually *gasped* when she put the pill on her tongue and sipped from the glass.

It was pure theatre and it was a triumph.



One of the earliest iterations of the blister pack contraceptive pill – a marvel of marketing and packaging, even back in the early 1960s.

And then there was an infamous incident that resulted in Humphrey being temporarily suspended from the university. He had invited Dr Peter Kenny, who was director of research for the Australian Broadcasting Commission and based in Sydney, to speak at a Free Thought Society meeting in July 1962. Prior to this event, Dr Kenny had appeared at a University of Sydney symposium to address the topic 'Are Morals Outdated?'. He was on a panel with a Mr Kinsela, of the funeral director family whose original business location morphed into the Kinselas nightclub in Darlinghurst in the 1980s. This conservative Mr Kinsela, though, was a dentist, and keen to critique events at the University of Sydney. At any rate, Dr Kenny, on addressing the question, started to riff through things that could be considered alternative ethical behaviours – such as legalising homosexuality or adding a masturbatorium to every home – though he didn't necessarily advocate them. It was this last comment in particular that raised Mr Kinsela's ire and he publicly responded to publicise how disgraceful it was. Humphrey, sensibly having an eye to attract a crowd saw this and, somehow blithely printed a couple of hundred copies of *The Freethinker*, effectively repeating what Kinsela alleged that Kenny had stated, and was then hauled before the authorities at the University of Queensland.

The 16 July 1962 copy of *The Freethinker* states:

[Dr Kenny] suggested first of all people have the right to fornicate or not to fornicate as they so desired; secondly he said that every house should be equipped with a centrally placed room, which he described as a 'masturbatorium', for the convenience of the inmates. Dr Kenny then spoke for some length about the possible dangers of masturbation, which ... we all knew was responsible for the growth of hair on the palm of the hand, and elsewhere; but he could assure the waverer that the whitish discharge which appeared at the end of the penis would not result in the loss of any brain tissue.

What is plain from these mostly playful comments is how sensitive and sexually unknowing many adults and young adults at this time were. Dr Kenny did indeed speak at the UQ Free Thought Society on 'Libertarianism at the Sydney University' to a packed house, and on 'Some Aspects of Morality' later at the Rationalist Society, to the deep consternation of some critics.

In the interim, however, things weren't to run smoothly for Humphrey. The vice-chancellor, Fred Schonell, who was a committed educator (and author of the children's book series featuring Dick and Dora) was away and so the acting vice-chancellor was Hartley Teakle, whose expertise was in soil. He took great umbrage at the type of vulgarity that Humphrey appeared to encourage in his publication and so suspended him

on the grounds of bringing the university into disrepute. Things were looking grim.

Then, as Humphrey tells the story, the academic panel selected to investigate the matter sought legal advice from law professor Walter Harrison as to whether the publication was obscene. Harrison read it and said that within the law, yes, it was obscene. He was then co-opted onto the committee and Humphrey was charged with obscenity under university statutes. But when the committee voted, Harrison chose to exonerate Humphrey, and his vote meant Humphrey's acquittal. The disgruntled minority asked Harrison if he was sure he had voted the right way, given that he had concluded that the material was obscene. Harrison responded that of course he had voted the right way. 'The material was certainly obscene,' he said, 'but I am not opposed to obscenity.'

They had asked him the wrong question. Outstanding!

The decision was such a relief and meant that Humphrey continued his studies. Lengthy criticisms of the Free Thought Society peppered editions of the university's student paper *Semper Floreat* throughout that year, so there was an especially strong sense of poetic justice that by the end of the following year, 1963, Humphrey had been appointed its editor. He had found his métier and has remained a bloody-minded agitator for social justice and freedoms throughout his colourful life.

Political awakenings

In Brisbane I made friends with people who felt like I did, many of us outsiders who, on moving to Queensland, grew aware of gender disparities much greater than we could remember while living in New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory or Victoria. These early years of the sixties were where the seeds of change took root before the substantive disruptions that would occur globally by the end of the decade. Change was still brewing, even if much more slowly.

Julia Ryan nurtured her twin interests in women's affairs and politics and introduced me to left-wing politics. Both she and Brian were always such dazzling company, engaged in everything and working to better the lives of many. My time with the Libertarians had focused on individual liberal freedoms, including those that flouted social norms, but the society never aligned itself to any political party. And in the early sixties I considered *politics* to mean political parties, policies and members, elections, voting behaviour, government

The public service

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, Penguin Books, London, 1928 (2009), pp. 38–39.

Public service redux: At the ABC

<http://guides.naa.gov.au/land-of-opportunity/chapter14/>.

<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/moses-sir-charles-joseph-15044>.

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, Penguin Books, London, 1928 (2009), p. 37.

Canberra

<http://oa.anu.edu.au/obituary/hope-alec-derwent-a-d-503>.

Bookish influences 1

John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*, Penguin Classics, London, first published 1873 (1989), pp. 145–47.

Merle Thornton, 'Sex equality is not enough', in *Feminist Challenges: Social and Political Theory*, eds Carole Pateman and Elizabeth Gross, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1986, pp. 77–98.

J. S. Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 1970, p. 148.

Brisbane

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/fiori-rinaldi-obituary-lawyer-traced-common-links-in-criminal-law-20150605-ghhc1r.html>.

Contraception

<http://www.dailylife.com.au/news-and-views/news-features/australias-horrific-abortion-history-20150320-1m3yuw.html>.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/entertainment/books/1985/11/17/the-dalkon-shield-disaster/6c58f354-fa50-46e5-877a-10d96e1de610/?utm_term=.8ab1a08146f3.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1987/12/06/magazine/the-sad-legacy-of-the-dalkon-shield.html>.

The University of Queensland

1 HIST MAT, Humphrey McQueen on Bruce McFarlane, conference paper, Canberra, <surplusvalue.org.au/McFarlane%20Articles/HIST%20MAT.pdf>, accessed October 2019.

Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Penguin Books, London, 2000, pp. 606–7, 637–38.

The Freethinker, newsletter, 16 July 1962, vol. 1, no. 6 (Fryer Library FVF186).

Political awakenings

Permission kindly granted by Raymond Walker and Petrina Walker to use excerpts from 'Aboriginal Charter of Rights' by Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal).

Bookish influences #2

Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, Fourth Estate, London, 1962, revised edition 1972, pp. 8–9, 10, 26; reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers Ltd © 1962 Doris Lessing.

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, Penguin, London, first published 1963, revised edition 2010, pp. 1–5.

The lead-up

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-08/curious-brisbane-when-was-the-ban-on-women-drinking-in-public/9518222>.

The Regatta Bar

Picturebook Communications, Merle Thornton (video file from *Four Corners*, April 1965), retrieved from <www.youtube.com/watch?v=GoNR_Y28euU>, accessed October 2019.