

2020

In Memoriam: Dr Deidre Wicks (1949-2020)

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Recommended Citation

Boyde, Melissa, In Memoriam: Dr Deidre Wicks (1949-2020), *Animal Studies Journal*, 9(2), 2020, viii-xi.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol9/iss2/18>

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Abstract

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In Memoriam

Dr Deidre Wicks (1949–2020)

The first time I met Deidre Wicks was about eight years ago at a conference in Sydney. I noticed Deidre’s paper in the programme at the last minute – ‘The Dairy Cow and Reproductive Technology in the Anthropocene’ – and found my way to the room upstairs where she was presenting. I loved her paper, and her warm and authoritative delivery, and so immediately the session was over I rushed up and introduced myself to her, blurting out ‘That was great. We should do a paper together’ and then (*very* unusually for me) ‘I’m a good speaker too’! I’m not at all sure what she thought at that moment about this self-proclaiming stranger... but by the end of the conference our friendship had begun.



Deidre Wicks, animal studies scholar and life-long advocate and activist, died on 10 November 2020 after succumbing to a lung disease which had shadowed her life since birth.

Deidre's major research interest was in the sociology of 'silence and denial' and 'wilful blindness' to animal suffering. At the memorial service to celebrate her life, her husband Emeritus Professor Roy Green spoke about Deidre's activism over many years. This included her leading role in the ban on the export of live cattle imposed by the Newcastle, New South Wales, branch of the Maritime Union of Australia. Roy recounted how this campaign was the start of a long association with the MUA – at one point the branch secretary asking Deidre to give lectures on Marxism. However, Deidre thought that would be 'preaching to the converted' suggesting instead 'What you need are lectures on feminism, and that's what you are going to get'.

Initially Deidre worked in health, as a registered nurse, then as a nurse educator, and as a lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of Newcastle, where she commenced her PhD, later completed at Macquarie University. Living in a nearby country town in the late 1990s Deidre found effective ways to focus on animal issues – managing to stop the rodeo coming to town by enlisting her family to leaflet the entire town and thereby getting people talking. Her work for animals became a major focus of her research and advocacy. She published on vegetarianism, including a much-cited chapter titled 'Humans, Food and Other Animals' in the regularly republished *A Sociology of Food and Nutrition: The Social Appetite*, edited by John Germov and Lauren Williams (Oxford University Press, 1999). Deidre's chapter employed concepts from sociology to consider 'why large numbers of people [are] voluntarily removing meat from their diets ... [and] the processes that operate to separate "meat" from the living animal from which it came' (145).

Deidre was a member of the Council of Voiceless, the Animal Protection Institute, for a decade and five years ago was appointed a Voiceless Director. She co-authored their major report on the welfare of Australian dairy cows, *The Life of the Dairy Cow*, which was published in 2015. She was a member of the Australasian Animal Studies Association, and was appointed an Honorary Fellow at the University of Wollongong.

I was honoured to include her essay ‘Demystifying Dairy’ in a special Dairy edition of the *Animal Studies Journal* (<https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol7/iss2/5/>) which demonstrates that:

the cow and her milk are the creation of human intention, effort and the application of technology with a view to using the animal for gain, and that while these technologies have greatly increased the milk yields of dairy herds, it has come at a high cost to the dairy cow and her calf. This design project is now embedded in a variety of social, legal, political and economic institutions, which work to mystify the materiality of human interference and the exploitation of the animal. (44)

Deidre’s work is both rigorous and accessible to a wide audience. She published a personal and influential article in *The Guardian* about the greyhound racing industry, ‘My Father Loved Racing Greyhounds. He Stopped Because of the “Dirty Business”’ (15/7/2016).

Professor Fiona Probyn-Rapsey has a favourite passage from Deidre’s essay, ‘Silence and Denial in Everyday Life: The Case of Animal Suffering’ (<https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/11/1/186>), that she has used frequently in research and teaching. As Fiona notes, ‘this quotation, if read out loud, always brought a ‘knowing’ smile from the audience, which was the perfect illustration of the very themes of silence and denial that Deidre was writing about’:

Without conscious negotiation, people know which facts are better not noticed and which trouble spots to avoid. For instance, people do not consciously repress mention of slaughterhouses when they are guests at a BBQ or dinner party where meat is being served. At the same time, they call on a common vocabulary to discuss the tenderness of the meat (not how young the animal was) and the “juiciness” of the steak (not how much blood and lymph fluid it contains). There is an unspoken, indeed unconscious agreement that such references would be bad manners or bad taste. This is why the mere presence of a vegetarian at a dinner table can make people uncomfortable. Their presence raises into consciousness all those ideas and images so carefully ‘not known’ and ‘not seen’. (188)

Over the last few years, working right to the end and against the odds, Deidre has been researching and writing a book on the dairy industry for publication in the *Animal Publics* book series, Sydney University Press. Her overarching idea for the book was to write for a general audience and ‘to show a way out of human addiction to dairy’.

A bonus of being the editor working with her on the book was that our friendship became closer. She was in and out of hospital in recent years but managed to cram in so much – travel, family, research, wide-ranging advocacy, and the occasional glass of champagne. We emailed and talked about her research and ideas for the book as it progressed and we also reported to each other snippets of our lives. I will always cherish her reply to an email I sent which mentioned the deaths of two much loved cows on our farm, Tulip and Star, who died a few months apart. I hope she wouldn’t mind too much that I’m including an extract of that email here as a way of showing just who Deidre was:

That beautiful boy, Star, I can imagine how much hard and heavy work went into loving and helping him. And then when nothing more could be done, the wait for the vet to arrive. So very hard and painful. You saved him so much suffering but took it on yourselves. And you had also lost Tulip. More pain and all the practical work around euthanasia and burial – that is huge and just disappears with the words ‘Tulip died’.

Deidre was an exceptional person – courageous, compassionate, charming. She will be hugely missed by all of us. Our thoughts are with Roy and their sons Otto and Claude.

Melissa Boyde
Chief Editor.