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Book Review: You Daughters of Freedom: The Australians Who Won the Vote and Inspired the World

Abstract

In 1911, while visiting London, Australian suffragist Vida Goldstein was embroiled in a heated debate with a male correspondent to the British Anti-Suffrage Review about the relative merits of British and Australian women voters. The British man was exasperated by Goldstein's claims to parity. Australian women, voting as they had been since the early 1900s, voted only on provincial matters. If women were to vote in England, they would have a hand in directing the affairs of a vast and troublesome empire. Surely, he said, 'not even the most enthusiastic Australian would dream of suggesting that the Imperial Parliament was not far more important than the Commonwealth Parliament'. It is precisely this enthusiasm – through which Australian women voters counselled their British 'cousins' to adopt their progressive democratic practices – that directs the narrative in Clare Wright's recent book, *You Daughters of Freedom: The Australians Who Won the Vote and Inspired the World*.

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You Daughters of Freedom. The Australians Who Won the Vote and Inspired the World.

By Clare Wright. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2018. Pp. 560. \$49.99 cloth.

In 1911, while visiting London, Australian suffragist, Vida Goldstein, was embroiled in a heated debate with a male correspondent to the British *Anti-Suffrage Review* about the relative merits of British and Australian women voters. The British man was exasperated by Goldstein's claims to parity. Australian women, voting as they had been since the early 1900s, voted only on provincial matters. If women were to vote in England, they would have a hand in directing the affairs of a vast and troublesome empire. Surely, he said, 'not even the most enthusiastic Australian would dream of suggesting that the Imperial Parliament was not far more important than the Commonwealth Parliament'. It is precisely this enthusiasm – through which Australian women voters counselled their British 'cousins' to adopt their progressive democratic practices – that directs the narrative in Clare Wright's recent book, *You Daughters of Freedom: The Australians Who Won the Vote and Inspired the World*.

The story of how British women got the vote, Wright says, is 'a monumental story containing all the elements of a blockbuster: heroes and villains, oppressors and the oppressed, charismatic leaders, violent conflict, blood sacrifice and, eventually, a victory for truth, justice and the liberal way'. But Australia's role in that British 'epic', she claims, needs to be told 'for the first time' (9). Accordingly, Wright writes Australian women into this 'epic' in a style that is in tune with all the drama and tension of the epic genre. She tells the story – or rather, the multiple intersecting stories – of how Australian women, embodying the democratic ideals of the new white Australian nation, assumed more than a 'crawl-on' role in the grand narrative of the British suffrage campaign. The extent of Australian women's involvement in the dramatic British suffrage campaign makes, Wright says, the telling of their stories 'all the more exhilarating'.

This is not the first time that historians have documented and analysed Australian women's participation in British suffrage politics but it is the first time that this process has been packaged in this way. Wright is a masterful story-teller and a rigorous researcher. *You Daughters of Freedom* is impressive in scope and immense in detail, as it traces the stories of individual Australian women like Vida Goldstein, Nellie Martel, Muriel Matters, Dora Meeson Coates and Dora Montefiore who participated in the British suffrage campaign, particularly its colourful and contentious militant branch. It weaves these stories – some of which are familiar to historians of suffrage politics but doubtless less familiar to the Australian reading public – into the larger narrative of imperial and colonial politics. What results is a striking amalgam of social, legislative and colonial-imperial histories, as well as a study of the rich tapestry of political women's lives, that takes us from the parlour to the Parliament and from the streets of Melbourne to the skies of London.

While awed by the extent to which, and the flair with which, Wright performs this feat, I have a few quibbles. The constant use of the Aussie vernacular will not be to everyone's taste. For example, Nellie Martel is 'a kid with a twinkle in her eye to scare the

devil' (65). Emmeline Pankhurst is a 'cutthroat mother' (207) (I should say here that I am uncomfortable with the ongoing demonising of strong female leaders like Pankhurst, a practice Vera Mackie and I have analysed). But beyond the use of slang, is the rewording of women's words. Muriel Matters' depiction of the British centre as 'an antagonistic social environment' is translated as 'the core of the metropole was red hot, molten bullshit' (181). Meeson Coates' famous suffrage banner that directs Britain to 'Trust the Women Mother As I Have Done' is interpreted as 'Australia has done it – so should you. You hypocritical, arrogant bastards' (242). I am not convinced that this practice is necessary to make histories accessible to the reading public. However, in saying this, there is no doubt that the book is popular, which is superb for increasing the reach of women's history.

Perhaps more disquieting is the triumphant tone that the book frequently adopts, despite Wright's claim at the outset that the book should not be read as 'a celebratory nationalist narrative' (xi). In delivering a story that is dramatic and exhilarating, and that works to place women in the foreground of the history of the white Australian nation's formation, the book tends towards the celebratory. On the other hand, I am not sure how this is to be avoided when Wright's aim is to correct early twentieth-century journalist Alice Zimmern's astute prophecy that women's role in shaping Australia's reputation as a world leader in political, social and industrial reform would subsequently be written out of history.

You Daughters of Freedom is celebratory, yes, but at least this particular celebration rivals that which is constantly touted by those keen to enforce the militaristic national narrative arising out of Gallipoli. Some of Australia's much-vaunted pluckiness can now be more widely attributed to its plucky women. This is the story Wright offers with verve to historians and reading public alike.

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