
Next time somebody asks you “what’s all this feminist stuff, then?”, you will be able to send them away to read Rosemarie Tong’s Feminist Thought, a remarkably friendly and sophisticated overview of contemporary feminist theory. When they come back mumbling, “It’s all very well in theory, but it can’t work in Australia”, you can deftly reach for Marian Sawer’s Sisters in Suits, a detailed and practical account of feminist involvement in the formation and administration of Australian public policy over the last two decades.

You will not be the only one using the books. Feminist Thought has been almost continuously out of stock since it came out late last year; the capitalists at the publishers, Unwin and Hyman, and at the Australian distributors, Allen and Unwin, seem to have totally underestimated the demand. (So far, there have been no reports of inflated prices paid on the black market.)

So why all this fuss about yet another feminist text? First, the thousands of students in various women’s studies and other courses which deal with feminist theory need a textbook. Of the three frequently used books, Eisenstein’s excellent Contemporary Feminist Thought was published in 1984 and focuses mainly on radical feminism in the United States, Burton’s Subordination is not useful as a general introduction, and the outstanding second edition of Feminist Frameworks by Jaggar and Rothenberg costs $49.95. This leaves Tong’s book, which surveys the whole spectrum of contemporary feminist theory, a steal at $24.95.

Second, the book is both friendly and sophisticated. It starts by explaining that not all feminists think the same way, and that there are such big differences between different feminist theoreticians that it is useful to group them into several distinct theoretical perspectives. The author draws on her long experience as a lecturer in feminist theory to provide plenty of graphic examples and ingenious explanations of difficult concepts, and succeeds in presenting the strong as well as the weak points of any approach she mentions.

All theorists are treated with a sympathetic but critical eye, and no one is made to look ridiculous or evil. Tong includes up-to-date material in her discussion of the commonly described liberal, marxist, radical and socialist feminist varieties of feminist theorising, and uses new pigeonholes for those who do not fit easily within the old categories. Her discussion of psychoanalytic, existentialist and postmodern feminism will save some poor souls from getting lost forever in new, unfamiliar feminist jargon and long sentences. To those few who have learnt to navigate the swamp with confidence, Tong will provide novel interpretations and food for thought.

Sawer’s book is equally important, but for quite different reasons. Sisters in Suits is a blow-by-blow and meeting-by-meeting account of who did what in the myriad agencies and programs initiated, staffed and co-ordinated by Australian femocrats (feminist bureaucrats) since the early 1970s. It is the first book-length study of what Australian women have achieved in terms of public policy machinery during the current wave of the women’s movement. Because of the amount of detail it contains and because the Australian experience is in many respects unique, the book is likely to be a standard source for years to come. In writing it, Sawer has relied closely on recollections of the women who populate its pages. She does mention theoretical concerns, but rarely takes a few steps back to look systematically and critically at what it all means.

Yet the book’s weakness is also its strength - the readers actually get a sense of what it feels like in the bureaucratic jungle and can use it as a guidebook before themselves venturing inside. Incidentally, there is abundant evidence here to debunk any blanket statement regarding the unrelenting patriarchal nature of the state.

Some male politicians and bureaucrats are awful and others supportive; feminists and femocrats support each other, disagree, make mistakes and become exhausted; programs which look good turn out to have serious problems; feminist demands might be resisted for years and then approved in minutes for odd and unforeseen reasons.

Last but not least, the book contains interesting photographs of Australian “sisters in suits”.

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Waves of change


With these two books comes some welcome and sorely needed insights into the complex political events in New Caledonia and Papua New Guinea over the past decade and a half.

Both are written by journalists with many years of first hand experience and whose knowledge of their subject is unparalleled among their colleagues in the Australian media corps.

The noise of the crowd was much worse. Chants of “Strip her naked!” “Kill her!” blended with “Australia go home!”...The police had now come through the melee and one inspector took me by the arm and yelled, “Run”. I’d forgotten that the Police Station was just there about 100 metres away. We ran the gauntlet of twisted faces, spit and punches, grabs at my shirt and my hair. The faces and the arms were so close I could easily have yanked an arm or a shoulder and repaid a punch or two. But it took all my efforts to control my shaking and particularly to keep looking through people - to stand above the situation and, although I was so close, not make eye contact with anyone.

Helen Fraser’s book Your Flag’s Blocking Our Sun is a personal account of the dramatic four years she spent in New Caledonia between 1981 and 1985.

Her time there began with the first assassination of a European independence leader (Pierre Declercq) and climaxed with the pro-independence election boycott in late 1984 and its aftermath, a period which left almost 20 people dead.

As the only Australian journalist based in the French territory, Fraser faced the wrath of the far Right. The above incident, which occurred at a gathering of 5,000 Caldoche who were laying wreaths for two gendarmes who were killed in a melee at a Kanak land protest, was just one of a number of incidents.

As well as facing danger of that sort she, and her son who was eight when they arrived in New Caledonia, faced death threats and even an attack on their fifth floor apartment in the centre of Noumea.

The hostility and personal abuse Helen Fraser experienced as a reporter during the time is testament to the passions of the far Right Caldoche and the intense animosity of the settlers to Australia’s perceived support for the Kanaks.

The book’s title is taken from a request by Yeweine Yeweine to a visiting French overseas territories minister to “pull down this red white and blue flag for it is blocking our sun”.

But this book is more than a story of personal courage. By relating conversations in villages, at independence movement conferences and at roadblock protests, it gives an insight into the feelings and motivation of those involved at all levels in the independence struggle.

The events during the 1984 election boycott were, in many ways, a forerunner to the 1988 protest in which over 30 gendarmes were held hostage in a cave on Ouvea island.

The 1984 protest marked the beginning of the latest phase of the independence struggle with various pro-independence parties coming together to form the FLNKS (the Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front) and the declaration of a provisional government of Kanaky.

It also saw the ambushing and assassination of ten Kanaks, including two brothers of the independence movement’s president, Jean-Marie Tjibaou, and the killing of Kanak leaders Eloi Machero and Marcel Nonaro by the French military.

Helen Fraser covered all these incidents for The Age and for Radio Australia, and they now appear in her book.

Fraser left New Caledonia before the 1988 protests and the subsequent debate over the Matignon Peace Accord signed by pro- and anti-independence leaders later that year. But she has been back regularly and her book contains a short epilogue giving an account of her interviews with Tjibaou and his deputy Yeweine Yeweine, and with Kanak militant Djubelly Wea just two weeks before Wea assassinated Tjibaou and Yeweine.

While in New Caledonia Fraser spent much time with Tjibaou and Yeweine and some of her conversations with them appear in the book.

The book’s title is taken from a request by Yeweine Yeweine to a visiting French overseas territories minister to “pull down this red white and blue flag for it is blocking our sun”.

As well as the political events which became the focus of so many people’s lives during the early 80s, Fraser gives a warm account of everyday life in New Caledonia, of her growing
friendship with two Kanak women and of her experiences in a Kanak women’s cricket team.

Kanak cricket is entirely different to the game played here. In the women’s game everyone can play, with the older women having ‘horses’ who make the runs for them. The game is played 13 to a side with a bat up to one and a half metres long fashioned out of the local lepeu tree and a ball made of the sap of a banyan tree by tribal elders.

There are few books available on New Caledonia in English; this one is one of the best. If you are planning a trip to New Caledonia it is a must...if not, it is a fascinating and affectionate introduction to politics and life in one of the largest island states.

Sean Dorney’s book, *Papua New Guinea - People, Politics and History since 1975*, while containing many personal stories is, as the title suggests, more a history of the country since independence.

Dorney first went to PNG in 1974 and, apart from a two-year stint back in Australia following his expulsion a decade later, he has spent most of his time there.

The expulsion order came in retaliation for the ABC TV’s decision to screen a *4 Corners* interview with James Nyaro, a rebel leader from the Melanesian resistance to Indonesian rule in Irian Jaya, which had been filmed on PNG soil.

In his book Dorney makes sense of the complex forces which make up Papua New Guinea’s political life.

Although the title suggests the book begins in 1975, it actually goes back much further into PNG’s pre-history as well as analysing the record of various Australian ministers and administrators responsible for PNG before independence.

In the post-independence period the book covers everything from the Bougainville crisis, PNG’s emerging and unique style of parliamentary politics to the massive problems the country faces with corruption and law and order (including the Barnett inquiry into corruption in the logging industry). It also examines PNG’s handling of its economy, the problems associated with setting up provincial governments in areas where regular contact with the Western world has only been established in the last 40 years and where almost all leaders and public servants have not had the opportunity to gain more than a primary education. Add to that the question of whether a coup could succeed in PNG, PNG’s fragile relationship with its gigantic western neighbour, Indonesia, and the history of its relations with the rebel Melanesian liberation movement in Irian Jaya (the OPM) and you have a full picture of the complexity of modern PNG.

Dorney has been at the centre of political developments in PNG now for a decade and a half. The real strength of his book lies in the detail it provides, in Dorney’s amusing and perceptive anecdotes, and in his determined optimism about the country’s future.

JEMIMA GARRETT reports on Pacific affairs for Radio Australia.
Man of Letters

Eric Gill by Fiona MacCarthy, Faber and Faber, rrp $45. Reviewed by Jim Endersby.

Eric Gill's is not a name on everyone's lips these days, yet every visitor to London has seen his work - he designed the typeface Railway Letters which is still used in all London Transport signs, posters and timetables.

Other typefaces he created - particularly Gill Sans and Perpetua - are still in regular use and their availability today as electronic typefaces, for use in computer publishing, is evidence of their continuing appeal.

In his day (he died in 1940) Gill was about as famous as a typographer can be, although naming 12 famous typographers is almost as difficult as picking 12 famous Belgians. But Gill was much more than a typographer. He was a calligrapher, a carver of inscriptions, an engraver, publisher and illustrator, and a sculptor who enjoyed an international reputation between the wars. Indeed, in 1928 the British sculptor Henry Moore worked under Gill on sculptures for London Transport's headquarters.

But Gill's public reputation in his lifetime rested less on his work, like the extraordinary Stations of the Cross in London's Westminster Cathedral, than on his highly-publicised views on sex. Gill's public proclamations on the subject frequently created controversy, as did his many unashamedly erotic engravings, drawings and sculptures. But, as Fiona MacCarthy's excellent biography makes clear, Gill's private life was even more scandalous than his work, including a succession of mistresses, incestuous relationships with his sister and his daughters, and experiments with homosexuality and bestiality.

This might have been less extraordinary if Gill had not been a very devout, and publicly devout, Catholic. Gill's religious views led him to found a series of workshops and colonies of Catholic artists and craftworkers. Each colony, founded around Gill's vision of a 'cell of good living' included his family, current mistress (or mistresses), apprentices, farm animals, workshops and a chapel. The live-in priest was as much a part of his lifestyle as the live-in mistress.

And, as if he didn't have enough contradictions in his life, Gill also progressed through most of the radical artistic and political movements of his time. His loathing of industrial capitalism and the shoddiness of its products took him through the tail-end of William Morris' Arts and Crafts movement, then on to the Fabian Arts Group and then a succession of other allegiances.

By the time he was middle-aged, his pacifism, outspoken support for Republican Spain and commitment to workers' control were bringing him into collision with Church authorities almost as often as his outspoken views on sex.

In view of all these contradictory facts, was Eric Gill merely a monstrous hypocrite? The contemporary popular image of him as 'the Married Monk' certainly suggests a man who wanted to have his cake and eat it too, but MacCarthy's biography makes it clear that he was even more complicated than even the complicated facts suggest.

Gill was certainly part of the tradition of scandalous, eccentric English artists. A tradition that stretches back to at least William Blake and would certainly include Gill contemporaries, like the painters Stanley Spencer (who was likewise possessed by a strongly personal spiritual vision) and Augustus John (whose extended family also included multiple mistresses). But Gill was also at odds with this tradition; vehemently rejecting the notion of the Bohemian artist, standing outside the normal rules of society.

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He saw himself very much as a simple craftsman (and craftsman is certainly the way he would have put it) in the medieval tradition (the tombstone he designed for himself records his profession simply as ‘stone carver’). He liked to compare himself with anonymous workers who had built the great Catholic cathedrals, like his beloved Chartres. But despite his rejection of all theorising, criticism and pomposity as “art-nonsense” he certainly enjoyed his role as sage, prophet without honour, and teacher. He insisted that his apprentices stand when he entered the room and always addressed him as ‘master’.

And yet, alongside his self-conscious medievalism, Gill was also very much a modernist. Whenever he pontificated on architecture, sculpture or lettering he would always stress the function of the work. His vision of a church as merely a canopy over an altar or “a place where chaps get together to pray” is closer to Le Corbusier’s view of a house as “a machine for living in” than it is to the medieval craftworker’s view of building hymns to God from stone.

The tension between his instinctive modernism and his gut loathing of most things modern is part of the appeal of his work. It’s a conflict that parallels the present one between the view that science has ruined the earth, and the hope that science will find a solution to the environmental crisis; a desire for a simple life among people who use computer networks to organise rapid protests against logging threats. Many of the contradictions which beset Gill have been compounded, rather than resolved, since his death.

Even Gill’s view of women is more complicated than it at first appears. The most sympathetic reading of Gill’s writings cannot hope to conceal that his opinions on women’s sexuality and social role were deeply reactionary, even when judged by the standards of his day. Yet there seem to be traces - in both his art and his relationships - of something more human than the misogyny which is the normal mark of the ‘womaniser’. Gill appears to have been sincere in his liking for women; as well as his lovers he had many close women friends. The significance of his many affairs is more ambiguous than one might suppose; he never concealed them from his wife Mary, nor did he ever contemplate abandoning her for a younger woman.

And Mary and Eric’s sex life appears to have continued, to their mutual pleasure, throughout their married life. Gill would certainly never qualify as a champion of women’s rights but nor is the simple label ‘sexist’ a complete description.

This month marks the 50th anniversary of Eric Gill’s death. It is hoped that this fine biography will play a part in the re-examination of this complex, fascinating figure who despite some repulsive qualities, and perhaps because of his myriad contradictions, may still have some relevance for us.

JIM ENDERSBY is ALR’s designer.

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**The INDEX**

ALR has compiled an index of contents, beginning with issue no. 85 (Spring 1983). Articles are cross-referenced, with a brief description.

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