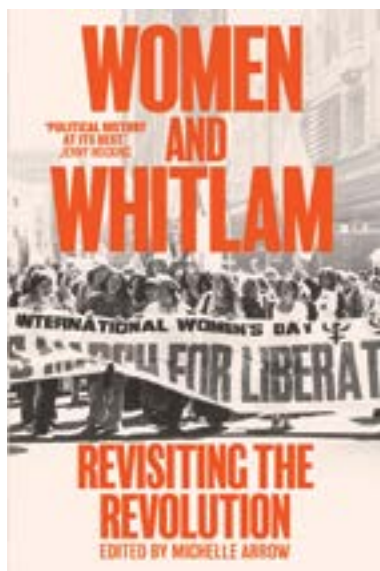


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Women and Whitlam: Revisiting the Revolution

Edited by Michelle Arrow

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Not many prime ministers achieve cult status, but the legacy of Gough Whitlam looms as large as his tall frame. In the fifty years since he led Australia there have been countless analyses of his social, cultural and political achievements. *Women and Whitlam: Revisiting the Revolution* centres women in this conversation, revealing the complex and enduring ways that the short-lived Whitlam government indelibly changed the game for Australian women.

Beginning with a foreword by the Honourable Tanya Plibersek, the book is split into five thematic sections

with chapters by twenty-five different women:

1. women and political influence
2. women and the law
3. health and social policy
4. media, arts and education
5. legacies.

Where the book shines is the vivid memories that shine through from the women who worked with or adjacent to the Whitlam government. The sweeping changes brought in by Whitlam—including the introduction of Medibank (now Medicare), free university, the single mother's benefit, the reopening of the Equal Pay case, and no-fault divorce—are described in the context of the lives of the women they affected.

Dr Elizabeth Reid's chapter concisely traces both the changes for women brought in by Whitlam's government as well as the work done by women to bring about those changes. As a member of Women's Liberation and as special adviser to Whitlam on women and children's issues, Reid worked to address the inequalities women faced in the 1970s. Yet, as her chapter demonstrates, women inside and outside the formal political structures faced harsh criticisms and personal attacks.

Cathy and Pat Eatock's chapter reveals the intersection of the women's rights and Aboriginal rights campaigns during the Whitlam era. Under Whitlam, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs was established, as well as the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee, while the *Racial Discrimination Act* was enacted in 1974. This chapter, which reproduces some of the late Pat Eatock's writing contextualised by her daughter Cathy, exemplifies the 'personal is political'.

As Terese Edwards, CEO of the National Council of Single Mothers and their

Children, Inc, writes in her chapter, the Supporting Mother's Benefit was life-changing for many Australian women. Prior to the introduction of this benefit, most women who were single and pregnant had no choice but to give up the baby for adoption. With the introduction of the benefit in 1973, single mothers were given greater autonomy over their lives through ongoing financial support.

Patricia Amphlett, in contrast to the more political achievements, argues in her chapter that the Whitlam government's greatest achievement was its support for the arts. Discussing Whitlam's establishment of the Australian Council for the Arts, the Film and Television School, and the Australian Film Commission, Amphlett recalls the impact such national initiatives had on her personally, helping her have the courage and confidence to perform.

Where the book struggles is the cross-over between chapters, which invites some repetition. With so many contributors writing about a relatively short and contained period of history, it is inevitable that different chapters retrace the topics of earlier ones. For example, the Women's Electoral Lobby questionnaire given to candidates before the 1972 election receives attention in many chapters. While no doubt an important and revealing example, it can feel a bit repetitive when different writers introduce the same topic as though the reader has not previously read about it.

Regardless, *Women and Whitlam* is a timely and unfortunately relevant book for the present day and for teaching political history. Arrow brings together a fascinating collection of essays that reveal the complexities, the triumphs and the shortfalls of the Whitlam era as they impacted Australian women.