

Reading list theme:

Well-behaved women rarely make history

The National Library of Australia holds one of the richest collections of women's history in this country: books, journals, diaries, letters, photographs, watercolours, oral histories, objects, and more. Many Australians have no idea what's there. And much of what's in it has never been seen by the general public.

Marion 'Bill' Edwards



ITEM REQUEST: A woman who was punished or judged for working outside accepted roles

This item was chosen by National Library of Australia curator, James Spence

Significance / Summary

Marion 'Bill' Edwards, a woman who lived and worked for periods of time as a man, today is considered possibly transgender. This article, published in Australian journal *The Lone Hand*, has multiple quotations from Marion/Bill.

...I don't think the world's much of a place for most women. They have the same tiresome graft, day after day; the same tucker (what the old man and the kids can't eat!); the same interests (washing the baby, often; and getting the keep of six people out of the wages of one!); and no amusements. That sort of thing would have killed me if I'd fallen into it. (p.305)

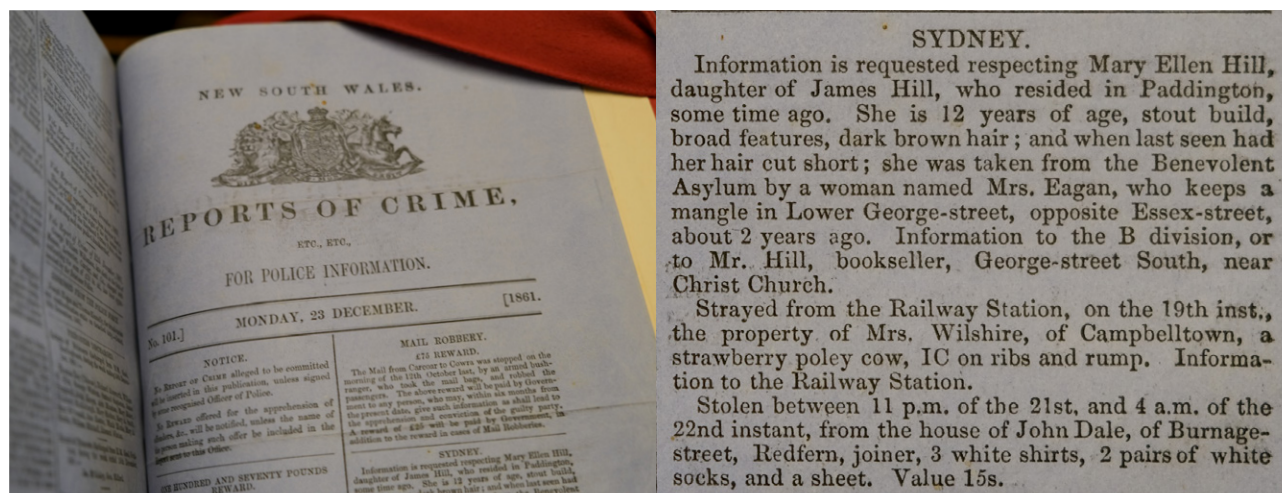
I'm going to write a book myself, y'know. It ought to be very interesting, because I'm going to tell all my experiences as a 'man-woman'—as they call me in the posters.

When my book is published I may take a hotel—I'm not decided yet; or I may just disappear. But whatever I do, I'll continue to dress in men's clothes. It's more comfortable than female dress; it's cheaper too. (p.306)

Why did the curator choose it?

This article was chosen because it presents Marion/Bill's unusual story in the context of the time, but we can still hear their confident voice despite this. The text alludes to Bill's legal troubles and enforced feminine identity, and also frames their chosen masculine identity as an oddity, unnatural and ultimately unfulfilling. Yet none of the quotations from Bill themselves reflect this judgment. They consistently defend their own choices, and point out the various ways in which living as a man was more fulfilling for them than the narrow choices available to a woman of the time, subverting the intended narrative of the piece.

Mary Ellen Hill



ITEM REQUEST: A police gazette entry or surveillance report that reveals more about the woman being watched than the authorities intended

This item was chosen by National Library of Australia curator, Susannah Helman

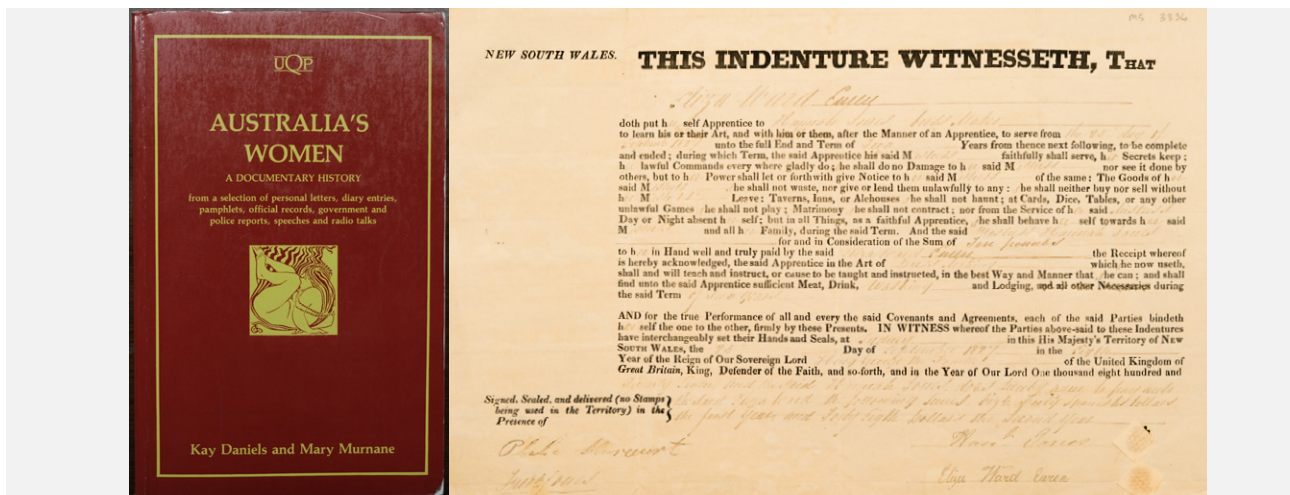
Significance / Summary

Just before Christmas 1861, the *New South Wales Police Gazette* reported that bookseller James Hill was looking for his daughter Mary Ellen Hill, who in 1858, aged 8, was committed to Sydney's Benevolent Asylum, a charity for people in need. What seems like an innocent callout for a missing child, may mask a much more dramatic story. In 1858, a John Hill killed his wife, and his daughter Mary Ellen Hill gave evidence at the trial, then, along with her siblings went to live at the Benevolent Asylum. Hill was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to only 3 years in the Darlinghurst gaol, which could be commuted to two years for good behaviour. Both John and James Hill served in the 99th Regiment. A coincidence? James died a celebrated bookseller in 1879. If James was not John, then who was he to Mary Ellen Hill?

Why did the curator choose it?

Tasked with looking for a story in a police gazette, I realised that police gazettes were published for the police themselves, and not available to the general public. While police gazettes have been digitised, I was interested in what we held as a physical object. I found bound volumes of police gazettes in the papers of Frank Clune, the prolific Australian author (1893–1971). They are printed on blue paper. I was drawn to this paragraph as it was full of names and places I could research through digitised newspapers in Trove. I found a much more intriguing story than I was expecting. See also [13 Mar 1858 - EXTRAORDINARY CASE OF MANSLAUGHTER](#) - Trove (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday 13 March 1858, p.4) and [09 Apr 1858 - CENTRAL CRIMINAL COURT](#) - Trove (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, Friday 9 April 1858, p.2).

Kay Daniels and Mary Murnane, eds, *Australia's Women: a Documentary History*, St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1989.



ITEM REQUEST: a record that reveals more about a woman than the authorities intended

This item was chosen by National Library of Australia curator, Cherie Carter

Significance / Summary

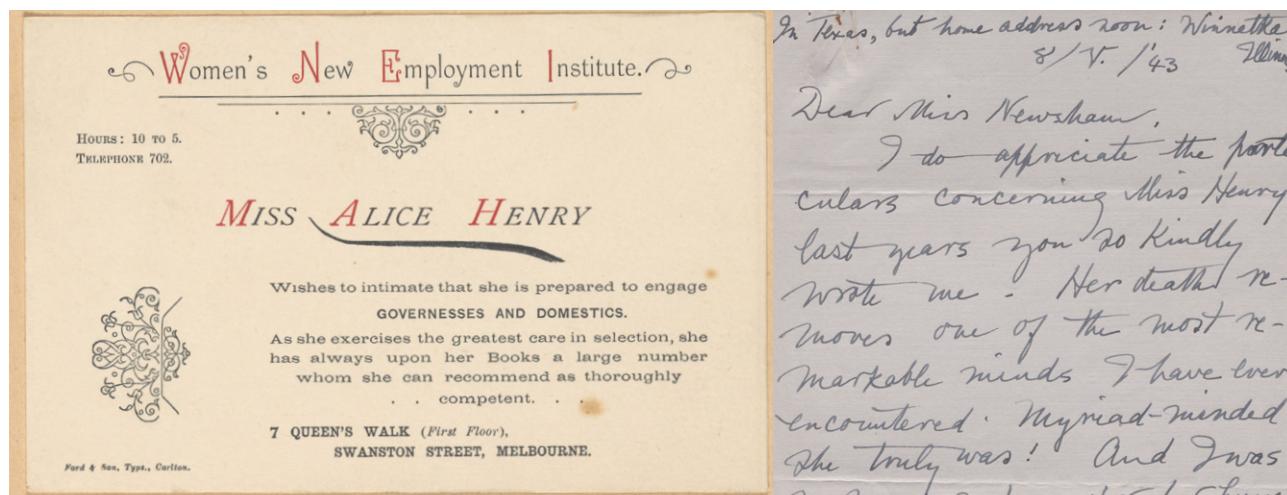
This landmark book, published in 1989, made accessible primary sources about Australian women, including restrictions placed on them. The book featured an image of this indenture, held by the National Library of Australia, which included valuable information about young Eliza Ward that would otherwise be lost. Eliza's story represents one of the few trades where women were offered apprenticeships in the early 1800s. Apprentice dressmakers, who paid to participate in an apprenticeship, often became unpaid labour instead.

Why did the curator choose it?

This book provides a sample of diverse stories of Australian women from multiple collections which may otherwise be inaccessible to people in the same way. The book was intended as a way of generating discussion and new ideas. It also explores the active response of women to their conditions, and not just as passive victims of their situation.

Kay Daniels and Mary Murnane, eds, *Australia's women, a documentary history: from a selection of personal letters, diary entries, pamphlets, official records, government and police reports, speeches, and radio talks*, St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1989, Australian Printed Collection, National Library of Australia, [nla.cat-vn2177053](#); *Indenture of Eliza Ward to Hannah Jones, dressmaker, of Sydney, 25 September 1827*, ink and letterpress, Manuscripts Collection, National Library of Australia, [nla.cat-vn2745549](#)

Alice Henry



ITEM REQUEST: A welfare or charity record that captures a working-class woman's life in unexpected detail

This item was chosen by National Library of Australia curator, Rebecca Fleming

Significance / Summary

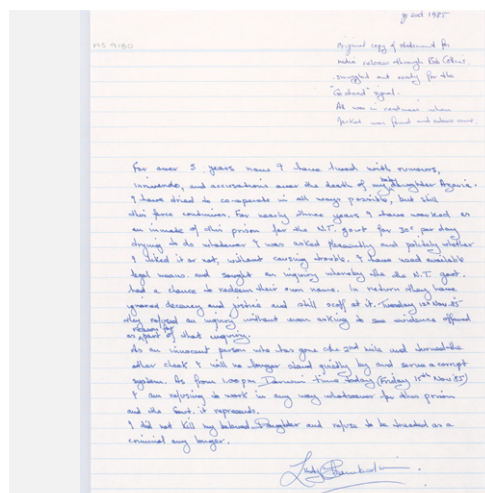
Born in Melbourne in 1857, Australian journalist and women's rights advocate Alice Henry wrote extensively on the trade union movement and issues relating to labour for women. An international collaborator, she worked in Australia, the United Kingdom and United States of America to raise the voices of other women and campaign for social change and better working conditions. Drawing on her knowledge of the Australian experience, she became a key figure in the campaign for women's suffrage in the United States of America.

Why did the curator choose it?

Manuscript collections give us a broad range of insights into a person's life. Sometimes this is through their own thoughts and reflections in letters, articles, diaries and publications. Alice Henry's thoughts on labour and social conditions are outlined in her various books and articles. The card from the Women's New Employment Institute provides tangible evidence of her work and advocacy for others. Other items, like the condolence letters in the collection, tell us something of how others thought of Alice and her impact. The letter by American suffragist and feminist Lola Maverick Lloyd is a compelling example which speaks to Alice having made an important transnational contribution. You can explore more of the digitised Papers of Alice Henry on Trove.

Card advertising Alice Henry's women's employment agency business, Papers of Alice Henry (Manuscripts), National Library of Australia, [nla.obj-4178744847](#); Her death removes one of the most remarkable minds I have ever encountered. Myriad-minded she truly was! And I was so fond of her for her human traits, even her failings, where she sometimes failed to be practical, as you must know. Her splendid sense of justice and love of all kinds of humanity endeared her to all who knew her. Mrs Marian Griffin (Walter Burley G.) was in the south here with me part of the winter, and we often spoke of Miss Henry, and I intended to write to the dear lady. – Lola Maverick Lloyd, American suffragist and feminist, writing about Alice Henry – Letter to Miss Alice Newsham, 8 May 1943, in the Papers of Alice Henry (Manuscripts), National Library of Australia, [nla.obj-4165316066](#)

Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton



For over 5 years now I have lived with rumours, innuendo, and accusations over the death of my baby daughter Azaria. I have tried to co-operate in all ways possible, but still this farce continues. ... As an innocent person who has gone the 2nd mile and turned the other cheek I will no longer stand quietly by and serve a corrupt system. As from 1.00pm Darwin time today (Friday 15th Nov '85) I am refusing to work in any way whatsoever for this prison and the Govt. it represents.

I did not kill my beloved Daughter and refuse to be treated as a criminal any longer.

Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton

ITEM REQUEST: A prison or probation file that tells a story of resistance or survival

This item was chosen by National Library of Australia curator, Susannah Helman

Significance / Summary

On 17 August 1980, Lindy and Michael Chamberlain were camping with their three children at Uluru in the Northern Territory when their baby Azaria was taken from their tent by a dingo. After considerable media speculation, public rumours and case mismanagement, Lindy was convicted of her daughter's murder and sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labour. Lindy always maintained she was innocent.

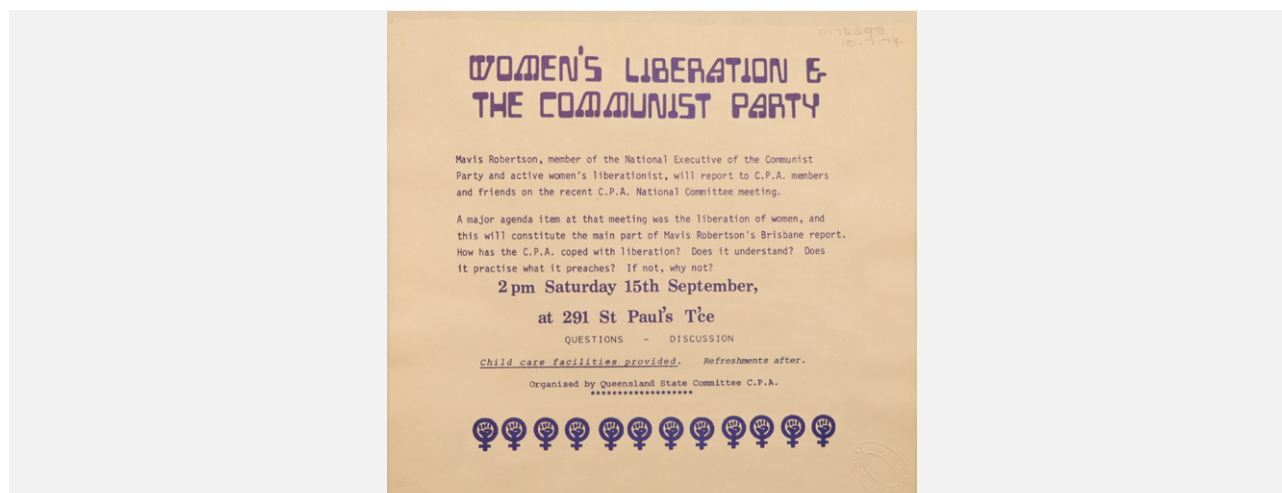
Lindy's manuscript strike statement was written in prison in 1985 in response to the Northern Territory government's refusal to call a judicial inquiry and smuggled out to a politician. After some delays, just when Lindy was ready to release the statement in early 1986, three major

developments occurred in February. Azaria's matinee jacket was miraculously found, Lindy was unexpectedly released from prison and the Royal Commission was announced, thanks to pressure placed on the government. Lindy's name was cleared at the Royal Commission and her conviction was officially quashed on 15 September 1988.

Why did the curator choose it?

Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton's story is one of great resilience in the face of extraordinary public scrutiny. Everyone had an opinion. The Library is the custodian of Lindy's very large documentary archive, meticulously arranged by Lindy herself, which documents her life and experiences. There is an annotation on this letter: 'Original copy of statement for media release ... smuggled out ready for the "Go ahead" signal.' Letters like this show the power of the archive.

Mavis Robertson



ITEM REQUEST: A union record that shows women organising collectively for better pay or conditions

This item was chosen by National Library of Australia curator, James Schofield

Significance / Summary

Mavis Robertson is significant because her life reflects many of the major social, political and industrial movements that shaped twentieth-century Australia. As an activist, organiser and advocate, she participated in campaigns for peace, women's rights, workplace equality and social justice, providing a unique perspective on the changing nature of Australian society. Her involvement in the women's liberation movement and her support for working women's rights highlight the collective struggles for equal pay and improved conditions. Later, her contribution to the development of industry superannuation helped expand economic security for Australian workers. Through her oral history,

Robertson offers valuable first-hand insight into the experiences, ideas and movements that influenced modern Australia.

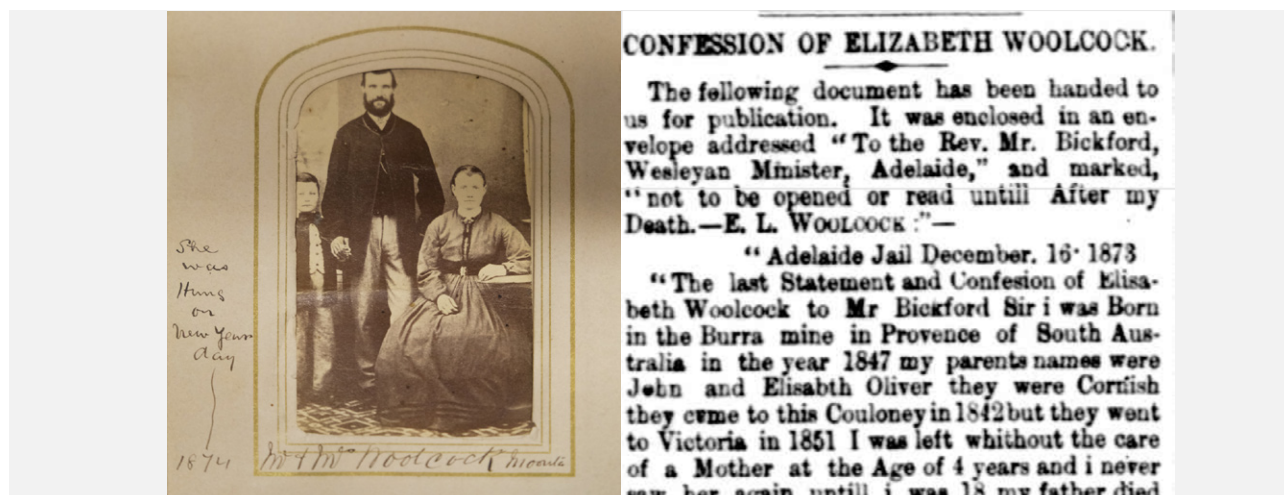
Why did the curator choose it?

Mavis Robertson's oral history was selected because it provides a unique first-hand account of many of the major social, political and labour movements that shaped twentieth-century Australia. Through her own experiences, Robertson reflects on women's liberation, trade union activism, peace campaigns, political organising and the development of industry superannuation.

The interview is particularly valuable because it documents how women organised collectively to challenge inequality and improve opportunities for working women. Robertson discusses campaigns for equal pay, women's participation in unions, and broader struggles for social justice and economic equality.

Women's Liberation & The Communist Party [1973], in *Flyer Women's Liberation & The Communist Party*, [1973] in *Communist Party of Australia: ephemera material collected by the National Library of Australia*, Box 1, item 19XX/93, [nla-obj-3633184573](#); Mavis Robertson (1930–2015), *Mavis Robertson interviewed by Sara Dowse*, 2003, Oral History and Folklore Collection, National Library of Australia, [nla.cat-vn2615450](#). [Listen to an excerpt of the interview](#)

Elizabeth Woolcock



ITEM REQUEST: A newspaper report that recorded a woman as a problem or a scandal but accidentally preserved her story

This item was chosen by National Library of Australia curator, Alana Stenning

Significance / Summary

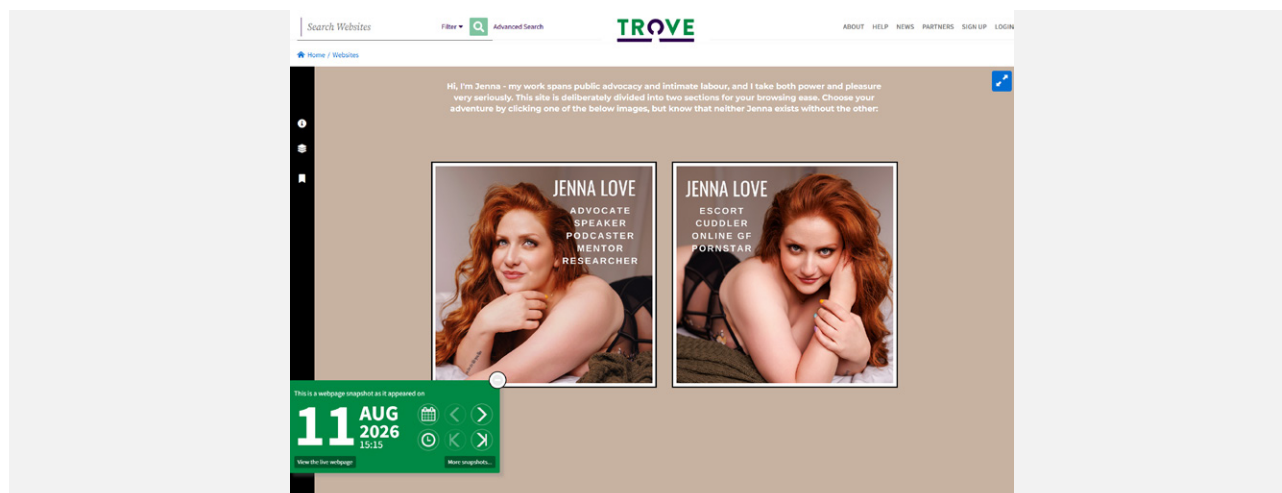
This newspaper clipping preserves the confession of Elizabeth Woolcock, the only woman ever hanged in South Australia. It was intended to document a sensational crime, but it also preserves her account of a life marked by hardship. In her confession, Woolcock describes being separated from her mother, losing her father at a young age, and enduring an abusive marriage that she repeatedly tried to escape. Today, the clipping serves as both a record of a controversial criminal case and a rare surviving voice of a nineteenth-century working-class woman.

Why did the curator choose it?

Despite Elizabeth Woolcock's confession, the circumstances surrounding her husband's death remain uncertain. The evidence at her trial was far from conclusive, and her conviction appears to have been shaped just as much by public perception as by the facts of the case. Viewed as troublesome because of her dependence on opium and rumours of adultery, Elizabeth was judged not only for her actions but also for her character.

Her life was marked by significant hardship and instability. Whether guilty or innocent, Elizabeth's story highlights the limited choices available to many women in unhappy marriages in the nineteenth century. As the saying goes, before women had divorce, they had poison.

Jenna Love



ITEM REQUEST: A record of a sex worker, protestor or agitator that humanises rather than criminalises

This item was chosen by National Library of Australia curator, Duncan Felton

Significance / Summary

This is an interview recorded for the National Library of Australia in 2024, one of over 260 commissioned for the Australian Responses to COVID-19 oral history project. Jenna Love is a sex worker and President of the Scarlet Alliance – the peak body that represents sex workers in Australia. The Scarlet Alliance undertook significant advocacy work for their members during COVID lockdowns, particularly around access to Jobkeeper payments, fundraisers for those who did not qualify, and potential overreach in the policing of lockdown compliance measures. She was interviewed to document her experiences and the experiences more broadly of sex workers, particularly in relation to the pandemic. As with most interviews conducted by the Library, her eight-hour long

interview is also a wide-ranging 'whole of life' record of her experiences and perspectives.

As part of our Curatorial research, we realised Jenna Love's website, which has two separate portals for her advocacy and for her sex work, had not yet been captured, so the Library added it to our web archive. As part of our remit under Legal Deposit, any Australian website is eligible for archiving: <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20260811060852/https://www.jennalove.net/>

Also of note is that the Library has been archiving the Scarlet Alliance website every year since 2003 as part of our regular .au domain harvests: <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20260408140014/https://scarletalliance.org.au/>

Why did the curator choose it?

This quotation and interview exemplify the adage 'nothing about us without us'. The experiences of sex workers are rarely spoken about openly, let alone when it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic, but this interview is frank and in-depth. This is one

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Jenna Love – *continued*

of many COVID-19 project interviews – collectively they contribute to a broader picture of events gradually shifting from the recent ‘everyday’ of the pandemic into historical memory. Oral histories like this can give voice to those often excluded from official narratives.

Both this quotation and interview discuss how sex workers occupy certain spaces in society and the cultural imagination, how they deal with discrimination and other barriers, their shifting place throughout history, and other wide-ranging personal, political, and historical perspectives.

A list of the Female Convicts on board the *Lady Penrhyn*



ITEM REQUEST: An immigration document that captures a woman navigating systems designed to restrict her movement

This item was chosen by National Library of Australia curator, Susannah Helman

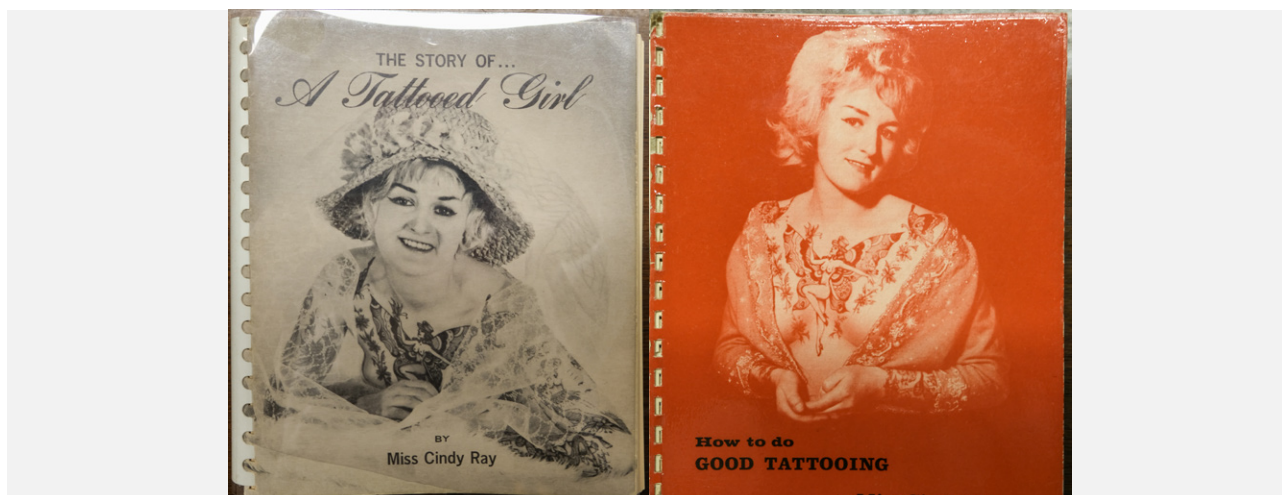
Significance / Summary

The transport ship *Lady Penrhyn* brought over half of the First Fleet's female convicts to Australia in 1787–8. The Library holds the first of three known versions of the journal of surgeon Arthur Bowes Smyth. It is his original draft journal, whereas the others, held at the State Library of New South Wales and the British Library are more polished. The journal is full of drawings, caricatures and doodles. Bowes Smyth has made a list of the female convicts aboard, describing them by name, age, crime, their trade and the number of years they were sentenced for transportation. This list is important and evocative. Accompanying the list is what is thought to be the first known portrait of a female convict, 82-year-old Dorothy Hendlin (alias 'Mother Grey'). She was the oldest convict aboard, and had been sentenced to seven years' transportation for perjury.

Why did the curator choose it?

I think this is the Library's most evocative original record relating to convict women. Though we only have one portrait of a convict woman in the journal, the details in this list humanise them. We can see that they were all working women, and practically all of them were transported for property offences – stealing of one kind or another. Most were transported for 7 years. While most were in service, many of them were skilled craftswomen, including mantuamakers (dressmakers) and milliners (hat-makers).

Bev Nicholas (Cindy Ray)



ITEM REQUEST: An item that demonstrates a gap, a woman who should appear in the record but doesn't, and where that absence is itself the story

This item was chosen by National Library of Australia curator, Rhys Cardew

Significance / Summary

Tattoo artist Bev Nicholas received her first tattoo in 1962 and was one of the first women in Australia to be heavily tattooed. She toured the country in the 1960s as tattooed lady 'Cindy Ray' and went on to establish Moving Pictures Tattoo Studio in her home town of Williamstown, Victoria. This interview, recorded by Madonna Grehan for the National Library's collection in 2016, is significant for documenting the life, work and legacy of one of Australia's early tattooed women and female tattooists. It provides a first-person account of postwar working-class life in Williamstown, women's employment, single motherhood, sideshow performance and Australian tattoo culture from the 1960s onwards. The interview is

particularly valuable because Nicholas describes working in a male-dominated trade when tattooed women were rare and commonly treated as spectacle. It also corrects and complicates the public record surrounding Cindy Ray. Nicholas explains that books attributed to her were written by photographer and promoter Harry Bartram, while stories and photographs included staged or inaccurate material. The interview therefore has strong research value and interpretive capacity, reconnecting the commercial persona of Cindy Ray with Nicholas's own voice and experience. It illuminates broader themes of gender, bodily display, stigma, media representation, professional ethics and women's agency.

Why did the curator choose it?

Working in the Oral History and Folklore section in 2016, it was my job to accession recordings into the National collection. I was often the first person to listen to interviews as they arrived from around the country. Each year I would skim through hundreds of recordings to create the

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Bev Nicholas (Cindy Ray) – *continued*

catalogue records that researchers now discover through Trove, usually spending no more than ten minutes on each interview. But when Bev's story came in, I was transfixed and ended up listening to the full two-hour recording.

What struck me most was the opportunity to hear Bev tell her story in her own words and in her own voice. Before this interview, much of what survives in the historical record about her was mediated through men, including the public persona of Cindy Ray. Here, however, was a different perspective: a thoughtful and deeply personal account of a life shaped by resilience, reinvention and self-determination.

The tattoos may have made Bev visible to the public, but it is through hearing her story that we come to know her as a person.

Police body-worn cameras



ITEM REQUEST: An item that demonstrates a gap, a woman who should appear in the record but doesn't, and where that absence is itself the story

This item was chosen by National Library of Australia curator, Cherie Carter

Significance / Summary

Police body-worn cameras are promoted as to enhance police response to domestic and family violence. These reports are the result of the first Australian study examining the use of BWCs from the perspectives of victim-survivors and police, including on the use, perceived benefits and limitations of the technology.

Why did the curator choose it?

This research into tools used by police in occurrences of family and domestic violence is a first in Australia and valuable in areas where women are particularly affected. It calls out previous research into the risk of heightened misidentification of some cohorts, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, as well as the way behaviour can be interpreted when victim-survivors encounter police during an incident.

Mary Iliadis, Bridget Harris, Zarina Vakhitova, Delanie Woodlock, Asher Flynn, Danielle Tyson, *Police body-worn camera technologies in responses to domestic and family violence: a national study of victim-survivor perspectives and experiences*, Canberra, ACT: Australian Institute of Criminology, 2024, National Library of Australia, [nla.cat-vn10019137](#); Mary Iliadis, Bridget Harris, Zarina Vakhitova, Delanie Woodlock, Asher Flynn and Danielle Tyson, *How police body-worn cameras can facilitate misidentification in domestic and family violence responses*, Canberra, ACT: Australian Institute of Criminology, 2024, National Library of Australia, [nla.cat-vn10019115](#)

Oral History Transcripts

Mavis Robertson

Mavis Robertson (1930–2015), *Mavis Robertson interviewed by Sara Dowse, 2003*, Oral History and Folklore Collection, National Library of Australia, nla.cat-vn2615450

(Session 3: 00:41:15 to 00:42:46)

Mavis Robertson: *And it was certainly a Congress very unlike the Congresses of the Australian Council of Trade Unions today, because as far as I recall, the only women who were actually official delegates there came from the New South Wales Teachers Federation. There may have been a few others, but out of a whole Congress, you could hardly see anyone who was female. And we stood on the steps of the Sydney Town Hall, and we had a little chant, which if somebody asked me to say who wrote it, I probably would have said Biff Ward. But anyhow, it said something like this. And it was associated with the fact that Bob Hawke not only had a reputation with women, but he continually called them birds. And it said: 'We're not birds. Birds live in cages. We've been there for ages on second-class wages.' We were not considered very popular. And people wanted to say to people like me, the trade unions are the main organizations of the working people, which, of course, they are, but so you shouldn't undermine them. I wasn't trying to undermine them, I was trying to strengthen them. And that dynamic of an argument was not very well understood by most men.*

Bev Nicholas

Bev Nicholas (1942–2025), *Bev Nicholas interviewed by Madonna Grehan, 26 April 2016*, Oral History and Folklore Collection, National Library of Australia, nla.cat-vn7086082

(Session 3: 00:22:42 to 00:23:43):

Madonna Grehan: *So Harry Bartram introduced you to tattoos. Then you did a bit of sitting.*

Bev Nicholas: *Yep.*

Madonna Grehan: *How long did you do the sitting as Cindy Ray for?*

Bev Nicholas: *Well probably in all it would only been over a course of 18 months. But that was not like a regular thing. And if you'd get tattooed, he'd showed up with the camera. He'd be recording what dates these were done on and all going into ah this book and um ...*

Madonna Grehan: *So he did a kind of tattooing history as you were being tattooed.*

Bev Nicholas: *Yeah he did.*

Madonna Grehan: *He photographed your story. Is that how he came to write the book for you?*

Bev Nicholas: *Yeah he did from that. Yeah.*

Madonna Grehan: *Okay. Because there's two publications. One is [called ...]*

Bev Nicholas: *Yeah, How To Do Good Tattooing*

Madonna Grehan: *How to good, do good tattooing. And the other one is ...*

Bev Nicholas: *Ah the ah, The Story of a Tattooed Girl I think, isn't it? Yeah. [That's right.]*

Madonna Grehan: *The Story of a Tattooed Girl*

Bev Nicholas: *Yep.*

Madonna Grehan: *Now they're um, supposedly written by you. [They're authored by you.]*

Bev Nicholas: *No they're not. They're not written by me. He'd just go along and I'd tell him different stories and he'd put his take to it. And next thing I know that's the book.*

Oral History Transcripts

Jenna Love

Jenna Love (b.1988), *Jenna Love interviewed by Shirleene Robinson for the Australian responses to COVID-19 oral history project, 2024*, Oral History and Folklore Collection, National Library of Australia, <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn10027197>

(Session 3, 00:09:50 to 00:11:15):

Jenna Love: ... it's interesting because, I mean, similar to, you know, I was talking about non-monogamy that, like, we know, sex work has been around. People say it's the oldest profession. I don't think that's factually correct, but it's been around a bloody long time. We know that much, and it's kind of existed in every culture and in some aspects of the animal kingdom as well. So, you know, it's another one of those things that's been around forever and, and it is, I mean, media loves it, like it's in, you know, I do musical theatre stuff, and, God, musicals are obsessed with whores, like they're everywhere, and there's so much, you know, there's Pretty Woman there's like ... our society's like really, kind of obsessed with the sex industry, but also absolutely terrified of it. And it's this big, dark secret, but also obsessive, and it's exciting, and people want to write about it all the time and stuff. So it's this weird, which is a terrible combo, right, because then you get people writing about it who know nothing about it, and then it just perpetuates all these myths and things. But yeah, and it's, I think, you know, most sex workers I speak to who are not out, feel the same way, which is that, like, I was so proud of the work I was doing, and there was no shame in that, you know, and I wanted to tell people, but I was aware, I was very aware of the shame that does exist in our society, and sort of how they would feel about it...