

Talk 2 Reading List: Well-Behaved Women Rarely Make History

“Well-behaved women rarely make history.” I think most of us have heard some version of this at one point or another, daring us to live an adventurous life. But when the American historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich penned those now infamous words in 1976, it was never intended to be a dare. The rarely cited second half of the sentence goes: “against Antinomians and witches, these pious matrons have had little chance at all.” Laurel had found that the women who followed the rules didn’t get documented. It was the ones who broke them who ended up in the history books. And while she does ultimately argue that well-behaved women should make history (which I agree with, as someone who rarely breaks the rules), the line was pulled out of context and soon took on a life of its own.

50 years on and it’s still an incredibly accurate statement. Almost every object on this list exists because someone was watching a woman who wasn’t “behaving”: a police officer, a court reporter, a ship’s surgeon, a newspaper editor who knew a scandal would sell. These records were made to punish, to correct, or just to gawk. And yet they’re also how many of these women ended up making it into the historical record. So when I say well-behaved women rarely make history, I don’t mean go out and misbehave (although I would never say not to do this!). I mean: look at who got written down, then ask who was holding the pen, and read against the grain and between the lines. You might be surprised by what you find.

Part One: Well-behaved women rarely get documented by the state

The convict women of the Lady Penrhyn

Arthur Bowes Smyth (1750–1790), 'A List of the Female Convicts on board the Lady Penrhyn' in *Journal 1787–1789*, iron gall ink, Manuscripts Collection, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-233364776.

The written record of women in colonial Australia really kicks off with a list of women who were sent to this country for behaving badly. Arthur Bowes Smyth was a surgeon on Lady Penrhyn, the First Fleet ship that carried the largest number of women, and when the convicts' own surgeon fell ill early in the voyage, he took charge of the 101 women on board. In his journal he set them down in columns: their names, their ages, their crimes, their trades and the number of years each of them had been sentenced to serve. In that list, you'll meet the women who arrived at Sydney Cove, on Gadigal Country, in January 1788, women who were, without choosing to, part of the project of colonising this country. You'll find Esther Abrahams, a fifteen-year-old milliner (someone who makes hats) transported for theft, alongside women in their sixties and seventies, and women sentenced to seven years on the other side of the world for the theft of a few yards of fabric. Each of those lives has been squeezed into a single line, and they're lives we would have barely any other trace of had these women not been sent here. Not only did ship's surgeon document these women, but he also judged them. When he recommended a handful of women be sent to Norfolk Island, he noted that one of them, Ann Yates, had "uniformly behaved well". Even when a woman is being praised in the records for behaving well, it's because she was first labelled as someone who behaved badly.

Australia's Women and Eliza Ward's indenture

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.

One of these two objects is the reason the other one wasn't lost, and if you look at them together you can see how a woman can make it back into the history books. In 1980 the historians Kay Daniels and Mary Murnane published *Uphill All the Way*, a documentary history of women in Australia, which came out in revised form as *Australia's Women* in 1989. It belongs to this extraordinary wave of feminist history in the 1970s and 80s, when women went into the archives, pulled out letters, diaries and police reports, and made them accessible to the public. They were making an argument: these documents exist, these women were here, so please stop telling us there is nothing to find. And one of the many documents they reproduced sits in the National Library's collection. It's an indenture contract made in September 1827 binding a girl named Eliza Ward to serve a master for years in return for board and keep. It's a record of labour rather than a life, but it's also how we know she existed. Somebody wrote her down to control her, and then a library kept that piece of paper for two hundred years (a real reminder that you never know what is being collected today that will end up being important tomorrow!). Then two historians decided it was worth putting into a book, and they were the first people to hold the pen over Eliza who were on her side. This meant that while the document itself didn't change, what it was being used for did.

Mary Ellen Hill in the NSW Police Gazette

[Police Gazette] *New South Wales Reports of Crime, etc., etc., for Police Information, no. 101, Monday 23 December 1861*, in Papers of Frank Clune (Manuscripts), National Library of Australia, nla.cat-vn2631836

Police gazettes were weekly bulletins passed between police stations listing the wanted, the missing, the escaped and the stolen, making them quite literally a record of who the state was watching. The National Library doesn't actually hold that many of them, but this one has ended up here in the papers of the writer Frank Clune. Just before Christmas 1861, the New South Wales gazette carried a notice: a Sydney bookseller named James Hill was looking for his daughter Mary Ellen, who had been placed in the Benevolent Asylum as an eight-year-old in 1858. On the face of it, a sad but nonetheless ordinary callout. But in 1858, a man named John Hill killed his wife in Sydney, and his young daughter, also named Mary Ellen, gave evidence at his trial and was afterwards sent to the Benevolent Asylum. John was convicted of manslaughter rather than murder and sentenced to three years, largely because his wife was said to have been a drinker. Both men had also served in the 99th Regiment. Were they the same man? We can't say for certain, but let's look at the fragments: an eight-year-old stands up in a courtroom and says what she saw about the night her mother died, and three years later a notice goes out to every police station in the colony asking them to find her. Whether that was a father's love or something far more frightening, the gazette was never designed to tell us. What it did do, entirely by accident, is keep Mary Ellen's name, hidden between the lines of another story.

Part Two: Well-behaved women rarely get documented by the media

Elizabeth Woolcock's family portrait and confession

Elizabeth Woolcock and family, 1871–72, ink and photograph, nla.cat-vn7290760; 'Confession of Elizabeth Woolcock', *South Australian Register*, Friday 2 January 1874, p.5, [02 Jan 1874 - CONFESSION OF ELIZABETH WOOLCOCK - Trove](https://nla.cat-vn7290760)

On 30 December 1873, Elizabeth Woolcock was hanged at Adelaide Gaol for poisoning her husband Thomas with mercury. She was twenty-five. She remains the only woman ever executed in South Australia. The first object is a photograph taken shortly before Thomas died: Elizabeth, Thomas and his young son. It looks just like any other colonial family portrait, but then, that was so often the case. Elizabeth's childhood had been marked by abandonment and by sexual violence, and by a dependence on opiates. Her marriage to Thomas, a widowed miner and heavy drinker, was violent and financially controlling, and she left him more than once. At her trial, Elizabeth was barred by law from giving evidence in her own defence, her lawyer called no witnesses, and historians have since questioned the medical evidence. The second object is her confession, written while in her cell and printed three days after her execution. In it she speaks about her husband's ill-treatment of her, and about being tempted by Satan. But we must ask, what does a confession mean when it is written in a cell by a young woman who knew there was no way out? The newspaper sold a wicked woman and a moral lesson. Read it now and you find a woman telling us, in the only place anybody would print her words, that her husband abused her. More than 150 years on, campaigners and legal experts are still pressing for a posthumous pardon.

Marion 'Bill' Edwards in The Lone Hand

Beatrix Tracy, 'Marion Edwards: A Modern De Maupin' in *The Lone Hand: The Australian Monthly*, vol.2, no.9, 1 January 1908, pp.304–306, Australian Printed Collection, National Library of Australia, [nla.cat-vn1211693](#) (HHP 1003 copy). Article available through [Trove at Vol. 2 No. 9](#) (1 January 1908). Language warning: contains racist language.

In 1906, Bill Edwards, a Brisbane barman, was arrested for burglary. The arresting constable had known him a year, and only learned afterwards that Bill had been born Marion. As Bill put it, "I stayed there until someone put me away about having been a girl." The charge went nowhere. The real offence was the decade Bill had spent living, working, courting and even marrying as a man. Instead of lying low, he went into business for himself. By the time *The Lone Hand* came calling in 1908, he knew that if people were going to stare, he'd be the one deciding what they looked at: "I'm going to tell all my experiences as a 'man-woman', as they call me in the posters." The magazine ran him as "a modern de Maupin", after a French novel about a woman who lives as a man. The byline belongs to a woman, Beatrix Tracy, and her frame is titillating and faintly sneering. Then she lets Bill talk, and he takes the article off her. In skirts, he says, the best on offer was a pound a week: "I earned £2 10s. a week as a French-polisher, and never a breath of scandal about me!" Even her opening facts are his. Tracy has him a Welsh girl brought out in 1885; the records say Murchison, 1874. He wasn't just talking to her. He was writing her article. Well-behaved barmen don't get magazine profiles. While Bill is in the national collection because the police caught up with him, he made sure his version was the one recorded: "whatever I do, I'll continue to dress in men's clothes."

Part Three: Well-behaved women rarely take the pen themselves

Bev Nicholas, aka Cindy Ray

Bev Nicholas (1942–2025), *Papers relating to Cindy Ray*, 1965–1967, Manuscripts Collection, National Library of Australia, [nla.cat-vn6422551](#); 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](#). [Listen to an excerpt of the interview](#).

In the nineteenth century, where would you go to find a tattooed woman in the archive? Almost always, in a prison register, because convict and police records noted tattoos carefully as identifying marks, in the same column as scars and missing fingers. A tattoo was something done to a woman's record as much as to her skin, and it was written down so that she could be caught. Late-nineteenth-century criminologists went further, with the Italian Cesare Lombroso treating a woman's tattoos as proof in themselves that she had fallen outside respectable femininity. Bev Nicholas got her first tattoo in 1962, and within a few years she was one of the first heavily tattooed women in Australia. Through the 1960s she toured as Cindy Ray, the tattooed lady, a persona that sold photographs and booklets to audiences who were equal parts fascinated and scandalised. Then she picked up the machine herself and built a career as a tattoo artist, running Moving Pictures Tattoo Studio in Williamstown. The Library holds papers relating to Cindy Ray and a 2016 oral history in which Bev tells her own story, and putting the two side by side gives you the persona people paid money to look at, and the woman behind it explaining what it was actually like to be looked at. For well over a century, the only institutions writing tattooed women down were the ones locking them up. Bev got to write her own.

Part Four: Well-behaved women rarely get kept

Alice Henry's papers and memoirs

Letter to Miss Alice Newsham, 8 May 1943, in the Papers of Alice Henry (Manuscripts), National Library of Australia, [nla.obj-4165316066](#)

Alice Henry was born in Melbourne, in 1857, and by her late twenties was writing for the *Argus* and the *Australasian*. She wrote about things respectable Melbourne would rather not think about: juvenile courts, women's hospitals, disability care, and the conditions people worked in. In 1905 she sailed for Britain and then America as a delegate of the Melbourne Charity Organisation Society, and stayed almost thirty years. In Chicago she joined the Women's Trade Union League, and from 1911 to 1915 she edited its magazine, *Life and Labor*, alongside her close friend Miles Franklin. The League existed to do what most unions of the day had no interest in doing: organise women workers. Alice argued, in her 1915 book *The Trade Union Woman*, that charity would never be enough to fix working women's lives and what they needed was collective power. So why is she in a collection about badly behaved women? By every outward measure Alice was respectable: middle class, unmarried, a woman of letters with a prematurely white shock of hair. But teaching working women to organise was, to many employers, about as disruptive as it got, and she had spent her career writing down the people nobody else was writing down. Alice is the rare woman on this list who was holding the pen over other women, yet when she died in 1943 she still needed another woman, the writer Nettie Palmer, to get her own memoirs into print.

Mavis Robertson's oral history

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](#)

Mavis Robertson joined a communist youth organisation at sixteen, and then spent the rest of her life organising people who had been told to wait their turn. Born in Melbourne in 1930 into a railway labourer's family, she became national secretary of the Eureka Youth League, campaigned against nuclear weapons and apartheid, helped organise International Women's Day and women's refuges, and in 1976 became the first woman named a national secretary of the Communist Party of Australia. In Cold War Australia, a CV like that got you an ASIO file, which means that for most of her early life the state's record of Mavis was a surveillance record. Then, after leaving the party in 1984, she threw herself into superannuation, which on its face seems like a slightly strange pivot, especially for a woman who had spent years giving ASIO reasons to fill her file. But for Mavis it was the same fight in a different form, because she believed a decent retirement shouldn't be a privilege of the well-off but an entitlement. She became one of the architects of Australia's industry super system, founded Women in Super and co-founded the Mother's Day Classic. Lower wages, broken careers and years of unpaid care all follow a woman into old age, and Mavis understood that economic security isn't a side issue for feminism. The state wrote Mavis down because it considered her a threat. The Library recorded her because it considered her a life worth hearing, in her own voice.

Part Five: Who's holding the pen now?

Lindy Chamberlain's papers

Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton (b.1948), *Strike statement from Darwin Prison*, 1986, pen, Papers of Lindy Chamberlain (Manuscripts), National Library of Australia, nla.cat-vn4555634

In August 1980, nine-week-old Azaria Chamberlain disappeared from a campsite at Uluru. Her mother, Lindy, said a dingo had taken her. Thirty-two years, four inquests and a royal commission later, the law found she had been telling the truth. She was convicted in 1982, released in 1986 and cleared in 1988, but it was not until 2012 that a coroner formally found a dingo had caused Azaria's death. Lindy's case was never just tried in the courtroom. It was tried in pubs and lounge rooms, in the papers and on talkback. Lindy didn't grieve the way people expected. She was composed on camera, she didn't cry on cue, and she belonged to a church many Australians knew little about and were, frankly, pretty suspicious of. None of that is evidence of anything. All of it was treated as though it were. The strike statement is Lindy writing herself into the record, from inside a prison, at a moment when every other version of her was being written by somebody else: "I did not kill my beloved Daughter and refuse to be treated as a criminal any longer." She wrote it in Darwin Prison in 1985 and had it smuggled out. The Library also holds more than twenty thousand letters people sent her: sympathy, prayers, abuse, marriage proposals, death threats. It's a whole nation writing to one woman to tell her how she should have behaved.

Police body-worn cameras and domestic violence

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

Every police force in Australia now uses body-worn cameras, and the promise is simple: the camera captures what really happened. In 2024 criminologists published the first Australian study of how women who have experienced domestic and family violence see those cameras. The 119 victim-survivors they surveyed were far less convinced of their effectiveness. Footage can lead police to identify the wrong person as the primary aggressor, and perpetrators can present as calm and reasonable and blameless for exactly as long as it's rolling. It's unfortunately not that hard to picture: a woman who has lived with years of abuse, screaming and furious by the time police arrive. A man standing beside her quite calmly, explaining that she's been like this for a while. The camera records exactly what is in front of it. It cannot record the years before it got there. And so women get judged on whether they perform victimhood correctly, and when they don't, they become the problem. What I find really interesting is that the Library is collecting this at all, keeping it in the national record much as the police gazettes once were.

Jenna Love's oral history

[11 Aug 2026 – SPLASH | Jenna Love – Trove](#)
(Australian Web Archive); 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, [nla.cat-vn10027197](#). [Listen to an
excerpt of the interview](#).

For most of Australian history, to find a sex worker in the archive you had to look at the charge sheet. Women who sold sex turn up as harlots, as vagrants, as idle and disorderly persons, as prostitutes. They're named in court lists and photographed for police records, and nobody is ever asking them about their lives. In 2024, Jenna Love, a Sydney-based sex worker, sat down with the Library for a national project recording how Australians lived through the COVID-19 pandemic. Jenna has spoken publicly about moving her work online when the pandemic hit, and about how even near the top of the subscription platforms the money came nowhere near a living wage. New South Wales decriminalised sex work in 1995, but the stigma didn't shift, and when the world shut down many sex workers had very little security and a lot to lose. This recording sits in the same national collection as the police gazettes and prison registers that criminalised women like Jenna for well over a century. And here she is, talking about her work and her life and a global crisis entirely on her own terms. That's what it looks like when an archive decides to actively listen instead of watch.

Conclusion

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich went looking for the pious matrons and couldn't find them, and every object here is proof of why. The archive isn't a record of what women did. It's a record of what somebody else decided was worth writing down, and for most of our history a woman had to be a problem before she was worth the ink. So read against the grain, read between the lines, and keep asking who was holding the pen. And then notice, in the last few items on this list, that what was once a woman behaving badly, is just a woman charting her own path, and how the library has recorded and engaged with that has changed.

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