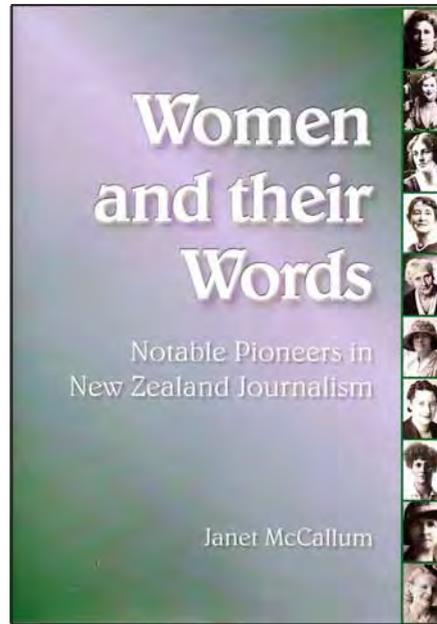


DR ALLISON OOSTERMAN started as a reporter on the New Zealand Herald in 1969 having failed to get a job on the Auckland Star 'because she was female and had a degree'.

## Tackling a persistent trail of gender obstacles

***Women and their Words: Notable Pioneers in New Zealand Journalism***, by Janet McCallum. Masterton: Fraser Books. 2009. 237 pp. ISBN 978-0-9582988-3-4.

PRESS history in New Zealand is still in its infancy and unless more interest is taken in the subject it will never reach adulthood. Research in this field has been fragmentary. There have been some general studies, for example Guy Scholefield's (1958) *Newspapers in New Zealand* and Patrick Day's (1990) *The making of the New Zealand press*. There are some substantial histories of *The Press* (O'Neill, 1963), *Independent Newspapers Ltd* (Verry, 1985) and the NZPA (Sanders, 1979). There have been various centennial pub-



lications such as Karl du Fresne's (2009) celebration of *The Dominion*. And in the last decade there have been positive signs of a resurgence of interest in the history of our newspapers with some exciting research underway or already published. Joanna Woods' (2009) *Facing the music: Charles Baeyertz and The Triad* is a recent welcome addition and in the wings are works on *New Zealand Truth* (Redmer Yska), *The Listener* (Lyn Barnes) and parliamentary journalists (Nikki Hessel).

But there is so much more that could be discovered and written about to enhance our knowledge of our newspapers and the journalists



who wrote for them. It is a rich vein waiting to be mined. One who took up the challenge was Janet McCallum, who in the period 1992-1995 embarked on an ambitious project to survey the women who had played a pioneering role in New Zealand journalism and have since been largely forgotten. Much of this research was conducted as a National Library Fellow but McCallum was unable to complete the task because of illness. Her partner and family, fortunately, did not allow her research to be wasted and published *Women and their Words*.

Future press historians will bless this decision, for in this book is a wealth of material, painstakingly researched, that will serve as a basis for further, even more detailed, investigation into the lives and work of the country's women journalists. McCallum has drawn on information from about the 1860s to the 1940s. The chapters are arranged by journalistic activity and cover such things as freelancing, editorship, women's pages, general and parliamentary reporting, children's pages, women's magazines and so on. Each chapter lists women who made a name for themselves in these various areas.

For example, of the 166 graduates in the Diploma of Journalism between the years of 1870-1981, 57 were

women (University of New Zealand, n.d.). Of these, three in particular are mentioned in McCallum's book, Olive (Mollie) Allen, (p. 195), Bernice Shackelton (pp. 64-65) and Mary Smee (pp.110-111). Allen became one of the few women appointed to the general staff of a provincial paper around 1935. Even with an MA in zoology and her diploma in journalism, Smee found a real prejudice against 'girl reporters' from the chairman of the board down. 'A woman has to be particularly efficient to survive the knowledge for long,' she wrote (p. 195). Shackelton was assistant editor of the Christchurch *Star* for nearly six years before becoming a freelance parliamentary reporter in Wellington. Not taken seriously, she had to work hard to prove herself. Her comment that she had to be better than the men would resonate today with many women journalists.

Smee, a friend of Robyn Hyde, became editor of the women's pages of *The Observer* in 1937. Nothing much can be found about those other 54 graduates. As McCallum noted, most of these women did not take up journalism work for long 'if at all' (p. 6).

The amount of information that McCallum has been able to glean about these myriad women is a testament to her research skills. It





is amazing how well she has done considering many of her women would have been using *nom de plumes*. Her task would not have been helped by the dearth of journalists' memoirs and by the dismal state of newspaper archives in this country.

Apart from the *Otago Daily Times*, which has letter books, company records, reporters' timesheets and diaries deposited at the Hocken Library in Dunedin, there seems to have been no effort made by newspaper companies to see that early records, in particular, were preserved. My own enquiries have revealed that nobody knows what has happened to the records of the *Auckland Star* or the *Evening Post* since their demise. We are not talking about copies of the actual papers. As any researcher knows, most papers have been preserved on microfiche if they haven't already been transferred to Papers Past, that digital cornucopia of information made available by the National Library.

No, what is important are those records that reveal the intimate history of the newspapers, the personnel and the executive and editorial decisions made over the years. One treasure that does come to mind, is the NZPA boxes of information held at the Alexander Turnbull Library. Anybody researching the history of the Press

Association, as James Sanders did in the late 1970s, will find plenty of new material in the dozens of boxes held at the library. My impression is that many newspaper records have just been tossed out as being unimportant. An ex-editor of the *New Zealand Herald* told me I would not be permitted to investigate early *Herald* records, if they even had any, because there might be something that would embarrass the owners!

What is often intriguing about McCallum's findings about early women journalists, especially the obstacles they faced getting jobs in journalism and then holding on to them, is how persistent these obstacles have been over the years. My colleague Susan Boyd-Bell recalls being a cadet reporter on the *Auckland Star* in the 1960s and being told she would not need to know anything about reporting Parliament because women would never be given the job. This despite, as McCallum demonstrates, women had been reporting Parliament since the 1880s. She lists Laura Suistad as the first female parliamentary reporter, followed by women such as Margaret Bullock, Forrest Ross, Stella Henderson, Annie Boden and Berrnice Shackelton to name some of them. None of them were members of the Press Gallery proper, however. Women did not become members



until 1965, when Frances Collett was accepted (pp. 51-66).

I can attest to the perseverance of obstacles for women getting into journalism. After an interview in early 1969 with Geoff Upton, editor-in-chief of the *Auckland Star*, I was told he would not hire me because I was a woman, and therefore would leave to get married, and that as I had a degree, he would have to pay me too much. I was accepted at the *NZ Herald*, and after two years, was the only person left of my intake of nine men and women who were either school leavers or those with a degree. None of the leavers were doing so to get married. I worked with several women who deserve to be remembered for their contribution to New Zealand journalism, in particular Jean Small, Barbara Baigent and Judy Addinall.

Another chapter of particular interest in *Women and their Words* is the one on women editors. Contrary to expectations women did gain charge of papers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, whether as a result of being part of a family business or being appointed from without. Jane Mander, for example, whose father owned the *Northern Advocate*, was hired as the editor of the *North Auckland Times* in 1908.

However, most of these women editors were on papers in small

provincial towns. Esme Geddis was the first to edit a city-based paper—Wellington's *New Zealand Freelance*. McCallum notes that it was not until Judy McGregor became editor of the *Sunday News* and *Auckland Star* that a woman edited a major metropolitan newspaper.

Has much changed since? Cathy Strong, formerly of Massey University and now at Zayed University, is researching the degree to which women journalists are integrated into the New Zealand daily newspaper culture. She has found that from 1992 there have been only nine women editors of the country's daily newspapers; Suzanne Carty, Venetia Sherson, Laura Basham, Karyn Scherer, Jo Myers, Kirsty Macnicol, Natalie Gould, Laura Franklin and Bernadette Courtney, and only the last two of these are still editors.

Strong is looking at the phenomena of so few women daily newspapers editors at the same time that women students dominate journalism schools and women dominate the lower echelons of newsrooms. When the country's editors are called on to explain why women leave instead of moving into higher positions, Strong says they have 'brushed off the reasons women leave the industry, saying it is inevitable when women want to raise children'. McCallum, from her



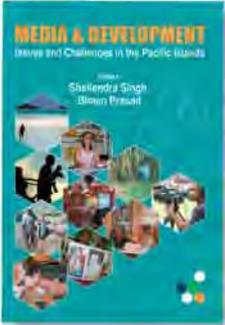
research, would say this is a very familiar shibboleth, and is one Strong hopes to dispel.

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