

# BOOK REVIEW

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**Susan Purdon and Aladin Rahemtula (eds), *A Woman's Place: 100 Years of Queensland Women Lawyers* (Supreme Court of Queensland Library, 2005) 833 pp**

*A Women's Place: 100 Years of Queensland Women Lawyers* is a wonderfully refreshing and inspirational publication on the topic of women in the law. The book was written to coincide with the 100 year anniversary of the *Legal Practitioners Act 1905* (Qld) which by s 2 provided that:

In like manner and subject to the same conditions as in the case of a man, a woman shall be entitled to admission as a barrister, solicitor, or conveyancer, as the case may be, and shall be entitled to practise as a barrister, solicitor, or conveyancer, as the case may be.

It may surprise some nowadays that such an enactment was ever necessary.

The immediate purpose of the book is to gather together the experiences and achievements of women lawyers from Queensland. The biographies are supported by an introductory section and a forward looking closing section, each comprising a number of detailed and well-researched essays.

The first essay by Nicola Petzl, 'Taking the First Step: The Admission of Women to the Legal Profession in Australia', chronicles the significant steps towards acceptance of and ultimately the admission of women into the legal profession. There are some interesting passages quoted from the Parliamentary Debates from the early 1900's which provide an insight into the prevailing attitudes towards women and her 'rightful place', being 'in her home, and with her children'. It is followed by 'Women Lawyers at the Frontier: an Overview' written by McCarthy, Petzl and Wallace. This essay is extensive in its scope and summarises the involvement of women in fields outside private legal practice, namely in government, academia, community legal services, services to Indigenous communities, in business, in regional Queensland and in professional legal organisations. The essay lays an important historical foundation for some of the biographies which follow by outlining the achievements of women, who were, in a sense, trail-blazers in fields of legal practise outside the mainstream.

The focus of the book is the biographies. These represent as a whole a wonderful, informative and remarkably interesting account of the involvement of women in the law in Queensland. The biographies are as diverse as the women whose lives they

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document. The selection of women is interesting in itself. There are women who have achieved great heights by being appointed to the bench or by working at an executive level in the corporate sector. There are also women recognised for the immense support and encouragement they provided to other women lawyers. Some of the essays concern less glamorous, but nonetheless worthwhile careers, where the focus is often on different, perhaps more personal traits of the subject. This gives the book richness it may not otherwise have had, a charm and soul not often evident in historical biographical texts.

The biographies are rich with information. Not only do they provide a fascinating social history and a very useful summary of the many and different career options open to women, but they also provide, on a more personal level, a unique insight into how these women were able to achieve what they did, particularly those who had to juggle work with motherhood. Unfortunately, there is no secret formula to this. However some common themes emerge. Many women spoke of the need to be organised: lists, whiteboards in kitchens and detailed timetables were a necessary feature of day to day functioning. Another was support, often emotional, from family and friends.

The closing section headed 'Future Visions' comprises several essays which provide an interesting variety of perspectives on the way forward for women in the law and on the way in which the practise of law and legal education might change in the next decade or so. These essays are also interesting and relevant. The book not only maps a journey, but also plots a course.

The editors of the book are to be commended: theirs' has been a monumental effort. Their reward is a work of considerable historical and social importance. The extensive collection of bibliographies constitutes an important collage of stories of women whose contributions to the law are varied and significant, and whose experiences and achievements ought to be recorded and read. It also reminds us that the incremental steps that each of us take, when viewed together, reveal great progress.