Introduction

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There is little chance the historical record will overlook the male leaders of Australia during the 20th century. Think prime ministers, think scientists, think military and sporting heroes, think governors-general. But what of the women leaders who have helped shape the nation in fundamental ways, sometimes subtle, sometimes less so? This collection seeks to redress this imbalance, but it also hopes to do more than that—women’s history, after all, has moved far beyond just writing women into existing historical narratives. Thus we ask here how a study of women leaders can change ways of understanding the meaning of leadership. Further related questions are dealt with in many of the chapters in this collection. What was it that made a woman a leader in 20th-century Australia, or, alternatively, what made her contemporaries see her as such? To what extent did she (or does she) see herself in this light and how did she (or does she) represent and define her work? At another remove, why do historians judge a particular woman to be a leader when looking back on her life? What defined her style of leadership? Was there something about it that can be defined as uniquely feminine? Were there common impediments a woman leader typically faced? And what ultimate contribution did each of the women considered here make as a leader in her particular field?

From the 1930s, Australian women began to be written into the nation’s pioneer legend, with memorials, gardens, histories, biographies and novels dedicated to their achievements.1 The 1980s saw another revival of this style of memorialisation and also the emergence of critical leadership studies.2 During the 1990s, the work of authors following the more theoretical approach
was often framed by the barriers to women’s successful leadership within masculinised institutional structures and organisations, and the resulting body of scholarship contributed to discussions about whether women should be understood to have their own style of leadership and whether they have found a space in which to articulate this. Within most of this literature, Australian women appeared both as faithful, hardworking mothers, wives and daughters and, from the latter part of the 20th century in particular, as fighting against exclusion and limitations placed on their participation within the male-dominated public sphere. These images are not and have never been mutually exclusive. Though a high proportion of women leaders of the last century stressed equality and access to opportunity, they almost uniformly felt compelled to abide by maternalist values until the consensus finally began to break apart in the 1970s. Conversely, failure to question this essentialist self-understanding did not prevent women activists from claiming equal rights and opportunities.

This volume does not deny the legitimacy of earlier images of female leadership, but it does complicate the picture, stressing difference in motivations, methods of operating and individual circumstances. Micro studies of individual women and their leadership styles, such as those presented here, have recently become popular as a means of exploring the field in a more nuanced way. Some of the women considered in this volume were married (often with children), some were single, and others devoted their lives to religion. Some of them paved the way for women in fields that had traditionally been dominated by males, others employed conventional models of femininity to make their voices heard, and some did both. Most explicitly challenged contemporary restrictions on women’s public participation, though only some consciously identified their position as feminist. The variety of activities in which they engaged is evident in the very local concerns of some of Australia’s women leaders compared with the transnational connections fostered by others, though some managed to combine the two by working in organisations that spanned local, national and international spheres. All of the women portrayed in this collection, however, made significant contributions, and all of them did it in their own particular way.

Before we look at the individual character of these contributions, however, we should first consider the nature of leadership styles available to these women, as well as some of the modifications and alternatives they developed in the process of formulating approaches with which they were (or are) comfortable. Conventional ideas of leadership at the beginning of the period generally assumed a masculinist model of power and influence exercised by a dominant individual at the peak of an hierarchical pyramidal organisational structure.
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The model has by no means disappeared from politics and large corporations, or from the Catholic and Anglican churches. Leadership, according to this conception, is exercised by delegation of authority and clear lines of command. It allows for no expression of weakness or self-doubt by designated leaders or for questioning beyond clearly understood boundaries. While consultation usually occurs at the upper levels of the hierarchy and may filter down to the lower levels through structured canvassing of opinion, there is no question as to who is responsible for making final decisions and setting strategic directions for the organisation as a whole.

Management approaches in recent decades have included alternatives such as flatter and simpler structures within organisations, and have found ways of encouraging team collaboration and productive questioning, but few have done away with the ultimate authority of a single leader or a small tightly knit leadership group. It has been difficult for women entering these structures either to break through what has been called the glass ceiling into the upper echelons of the organisation or to introduce new styles of leadership. While some have openly challenged the existing system—for example in the mainstream political parties, in government departments, or the police force—they have often been forced to compromise and adopt some of the masculinist modes of operating regarded as natural or given in order to achieve power and respect. In other such institutions, the Catholic church for example, women have struggled to have their leadership accepted in a context of entrenched gendered power structures that worked to prevent their access to the high-level influential positions through which the future direction of those bodies was shaped. Many women who have achieved leadership in these hierarchical organisations have developed powerful critiques of a culture that placed (or places) serious obstacles in their way and have worked to mentor younger women and to make their paths to leadership easier.

Very different understandings of how leadership can be achieved are apparent among other women who have reached positions of influence and power in traditionally male domains or professions rather than specific organisations. Such women commonly attribute their success to accident, serendipity or good fortune and, while not denying prejudice and resistance to their advancement, often also credit others with recognising their leadership qualities and providing opportunities to exercise them over and above any career trajectories of their own devising. They nevertheless express a sense of responsibility for mentoring and assisting other qualified women with leadership potential and ambition, thus implicitly acknowledging that their own path to influence may be outside the norm or that the image they choose
to project in accounting for their success may conceal a steelier, more masculine, resolve than they are prepared to admit.

Women have generally been freer to develop different styles of leadership outside male-dominated organisations, institutions and professions, though the degree to which they have done so varies. Although older women’s organisations like the National Council of Women and the Country Women’s Association themselves adopted ostensibly hierarchical structures and leadership models, they have always encouraged flexibility and stressed the desirability of consensus, the leaders focusing on bringing members along with them rather than issuing fiats. This was in part made necessary by loose federal organisation that weakened the hierarchical structures, and by constitutional limitations that restricted the degree of power a leader was able to exercise over affiliated branches and societies. Networking to evolve ideas and strategies with broad acceptance has therefore always been evident within these large organisations but is even more apparent in community and grassroots associations’ styles of leadership—among Indigenous women and among disability activists for example. Many such women have refused to see themselves as leaders at all and attributed their achievements to group endeavour. For others, whose achievements have taken place within self-consciously alternative social movements such as Women’s Liberation and Greenpeace, this insistence on collective responsibility for and accomplishment of goals constitutes a political value explicitly eschewing the exercise of individual power and influence—and hence leadership—over others.5

The contributions to this collection canvass a variety of styles and types of leadership across many fields of endeavour, and include analyses of women working for Indigenous rights, becoming leaders in their professions, working inside and outside of Australia’s political system, and driving non-government agencies. While they are often undoubtedly stories of success, they are also narratives of sacrifice—for many women, leadership came at a significant cost. The emphasis here, however, is on the contributions they managed to make and the enduring influence they have exercised.

Over the 20th century, the nature of women’s work in relation to Indigenous rights changed significantly. This transition is clearly reflected in this volume, as we move from white women working on behalf of Indigenous women to Indigenous women fighting for themselves and their communities. We open with Julie Evans’ consideration of the leadership of Katie Langloh Parker, who saw first hand the reality of the treatment faced by Australia’s Indigenous population when many others in white Australia chose to remain ignorant or
unconcerned. A writer and a beneficiary of colonial settlement, Parker played a key role collecting Aboriginal ‘myths and legends’. Like many in this volume, Parker did not see herself as a leader, but the dedication she put into saving the stories of the Yuwalaray people have caused others to do so and to define her contribution to the field of Australian ethnography as one that broke new ground.

From Parker, we turn to another woman living alongside an Australian Aboriginal community, the missionary Matilda Ward. Joanna Cruickshank’s study highlights Ward’s sympathy for Indigenous people and their concerns at a time when Australia’s Aboriginal population was often ignored or the subject of derision. But she is also careful to acknowledge the limits of this engagement, never losing sight of the broader paternalistic framework within which Ward’s work took place. We see here an early shift in the acknowledgment of missionary women too, with Ward being one of the first to receive recognition in her own right and thus to earn a wage for her work.

Eleanor Rivett was also an Australian missionary who saw clearly the impacts of colonialism on Indigenous people, in this case in India. In Margaret Allen’s chapter, we see Rivett in Kolkata and Chennai negotiating cross-cultural relationships with a sophistication and sensitivity ahead of her time, and we also learn of her attempts while on furlough back home to educate the Australian public about the importance of their nation’s position in the Asia–Pacific region for fostering East–West understanding. Though acknowledging that Rivett’s inspiration came in part from the Student Christian Movement, Allen argues that her leadership style was fundamentally shaped by her family background, which stressed the importance of education and religion and, in the face of community criticism, opposed racial discrimination and the White Australia Policy.

From white women working alongside Indigenous communities, we turn to Aboriginal women who took a leading role in the fight for Indigenous rights from the mid-20th century. Patricia Grimshaw’s account of Gladys Nicholls shows clearly the leadership style she developed as she sought to improve the situation of the growing number of Aboriginal people living in Melbourne. Although Nicholls’ role is often overshadowed by that of her husband, Sir Doug Nicholls, an Aboriginal pastor who worked tirelessly and prominently for Aboriginal rights, she is well known and respected by those who worked with her for her determination, intelligence and commitment to developing support networks and improving the wellbeing of the city’s Indigenous inhabitants.
Another Aboriginal woman leader who worked largely behind the scenes, Mollie Dyer was a mother of 6 and foster mother of 19, who devoted her life to caring for children and played a key role in creating the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency in the 1970s. In Fiona Davis’s chapter, we see clearly the clever means that Dyer employed in drawing on the help of white and Aboriginal people to improve the situation for Victoria’s Indigenous children, whilst nevertheless remaining determined that Aboriginal organisations be led by Aboriginal people. We also see a leadership style that stressed collective work and decision making among Aboriginal women as a form of empowerment.

The next cluster of chapters in this collection focuses on women who worked in the rising numbers of professions available to them to help their communities. First we turn to Vera Scantlebury (later Scantlebury Brown), who, like Dyer, is best known for her tireless work for Australian children, which saw her setting up the structure of universal maternal and child health services and pre-schools in Victoria that still exists today. The focus of Heather Sheard’s chapter, however, is the earlier influences on Scantlebury’s leadership style, developed while working under two female doctors in a woman-run military hospital in London during World War I. Using Scantlebury’s letters and diaries, Sheard traces in detail the gradual but clear progress of the newly qualified young doctor’s education at the hands of these two women, who not only taught her surgical and medical skills but also revealed to her the possibilities of being single, professional and independent at a time when this was anything but commonplace.

Like Scantlebury Brown, Maude O’Connell, the founder of the religious congregation the Grey Sisters, forged a career driven by a commitment to social justice and the needs of the vulnerable, in this case, over-burdened and impoverished mothers in the poorer suburbs of inter-war Melbourne. In doing so, she also gained encouragement and support from other women, most notably May Bannon, one of the first members of her congregation and her close companion until her death. Anne O’Brien’s study of O’Connell, who was also a leader of Melbourne’s post-suffrage trade union movement, finds that much of O’Connell’s inspiration came from the untimely death of her own mother, as well as from her staunch religious faith and apparent disregard for many of the gender norms of the era. But O’Connell’s leadership was not without challenge, O’Brien’s analysis providing an admirably nuanced and sensitive picture of her acceptance of Catholic teaching about family and birth control while devoting her energies to mitigating its consequences, and of her acquiescence—though not without bitterness—to the decision of the church
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authorities to remove her from leadership of the order as a condition of its approval by Rome.

Some twenty years later, another Victorian, Tessa Wardell, demonstrated a similar level of commitment to religion and social issues. As Nell Musgrove reveals, Wardell was instrumental in expanding the recognition of social work expertise into the field of child welfare, laying down the foundations for the field in which Mollie Dyer became active on behalf of Aboriginal children from the 1970s. Wardell would also play a pivotal role in establishing standards of practice for Australia’s Catholic social workers, drawing on her own experience of its need as well as international contact and discussion with Catholic social workers in the United States. Her pioneering efforts did not, however, proceed without experiencing some resistance from both state and church to her assertion of expertise and authority.

Unlike many in this volume, high school principal Molly Brennan was, and still is, under no false impressions as to her role as a leader and the fact that she had to adopt overtly masculine and confrontational methods to achieve her ends. In Deborah Towns’ chapter Brennan emerges clearly as a trailblazer, challenging a discriminatory selection process to become the first female principal of a large Victorian co-educational government high school and also consciously testing the entrenched gender order in asserting her right (albeit unsuccessfully) as number one on the promotion roll to be appointed to the principal position at Melbourne High School, a boys’ selective-entry school, in the mid-1970s. Though Brennan felt compelled to employ a confrontational style in her dealings with the Education Department, Towns nevertheless stresses the importance to her of working closely with other senior women in the Victorian Head Mistresses Association, especially long-time friend and colleague Nina Carr, and of making time to mentor younger women in the profession. Hers was an ambition and notion of leadership as much focused on gender as self.

Another trailblazer, Valerie French became the first woman to sign the Western Australian Bar roll and the first female barrister to practise in the west coast legal fraternity before moving to the bench and rising through the District Court to become president of the Western Australian Children’s Court. But, as Hollie Kerwin and Kim Rubenstein show, French depicts her impressive rise not in terms of her individual drive and ultimate success, but as the result of luck, accident and the support of others, especially her husband. Her interview nevertheless makes it clear that in specific instances her own intervention and judgment were crucial factors in her success and the respect she has accrued.
Audrey Ann Fagan, the first woman to head the ACT Policing component of the Australian Federal Police, and the second in Australia or New Zealand to lead a policing jurisdiction, also made her mark taking on a role long dominated by men in an institutional context actively hostile to women in positions of command. In Susan Harwood and Helen McDermott’s sensitive account, however, we see both the inspirational nature of such a career, and the high toll exacted by loneliness at the top and consequent vulnerability to attack. We particularly see the importance she attributed to women helping women—a term used to summarise the purpose of women’s organisation across the century, from the National Council of Women to Women’s Liberation—in her dedication to the work of the Australasian Council of Women and Policing and in her appreciation of the example of others such as Christine Nixon.

From women who have led their professions, we turn to women who have shown political leadership—albeit in many different ways. The first three subjects in this group have taken leadership roles in party politics. Muriel Heagney, for instance, fought for equality for women, both in the workforce and in the broader society, as a member (and occasional executive member) of the Victorian branch of the Australian Labor Party for over half a century. Rosemary Francis shows, however, the difficulties Heagney faced trying to dismantle the entrenched gender bias and prejudices of the labour movement hierarchy, her forthright approach and determination offending many and ultimately undermining her capacity to lead. Her unceasing battles for gender equality in the movement, and her willingness to work with other women’s organisations to expose injustices rather than confining her activism to the party women’s committee, demonstrated her courage and preparedness to incur the wrath of the most irredeemably masculinist of Australian political party hierarchies. Acknowledged now as one of Australia’s most important leaders in the equal pay campaign, she was during her life time ostracised and punished by Labor Party male leaders as disloyal and difficult.

A very different type of party political leadership is exemplified by Fran Bailey, who was the first Liberal Party woman to be elected to the House of Representatives. As Jackie Dickenson’s chapter reveals, Bailey was similarly determined but also highly pragmatic. Stereotypically feminine attributes became important tools for Bailey’s political survival in the marginal Victorian seat of McEwen and for her achievements as a ‘good local member’, making a real difference, in particular, for disadvantaged women and their families. Apart from her purposely provocative use of pink in campaigning, rather than the traditional Liberal Party blue, she self-consciously focused on
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grassroots issues, community networks and personal contact, deliberately eschewing too much association with the male leaders of the party in wooing her electorate.

Lee Rhiannon took her seat for the Greens in the Australian Senate in July 2011, twelve months after Bailey officially retired from politics. Rhiannon though, as Suellen Murray explains, is not new to politics, with over 40 years of political activism under her belt. A strong advocate for environmental, peace and social justice issues, Rhiannon draws on her family foundations in left-leaning politics to make a difference, but also demonstrates a strong commitment to a second-wave feminist political style, stressing collective decision making and direct action. Murray emphasises, for example, the importance of the Pine Gap women’s peace camp protests to her political inspiration, philosophy and development.

The last two chapters in this group focus directly on grassroots activist leaders. First is Jacqui Theobald’s study of Billi Clarke, another long-time political campaigner. A determined advocate for women’s right to live free from violence, Clarke has worked tirelessly in Victoria’s domestic violence services movement for over twenty years, helping establish new services and overhaul old ones to make them more effective and appropriate to women of different ethnicities, sexual preference and age, as well as women with disabilities. Theobald traces the development of Clarke’s leadership style to her experiences of being an outsider at school in working-class Frankston, and her early association with others—particularly lesbians like herself—who did not fit in. Her claim to have fallen into domestic violence services by accident is belied by her account of being politicised by local police repression and experience of violence at home, and her early encounter with Women’s Liberation.

Next comes Nikki Henningham’s account of Margaret Cooper, who, like Clarke, has led real improvements in the lives of the disadvantaged. Since the 1970s, Cooper has helped lead the disability rights movement, founding and serving for many years as a member of Women with Disabilities Victoria. We see many parallels between the campaigns of Billi Clarke and Margaret Cooper to have the diverse needs of Australian women recognised by the very services and structures that have been designed to support them but which have frequently failed to recognise the need for different approaches and for involvement and direction by the women affected. Cooper’s philosophy of leadership is, however, more self-conscious and developed than most. Working with the motto ‘Nothing about us without us’, she elaborated, as Henningham writes, on a feminist ideal of decision making that was ‘circular’
While Clarke and Cooper, by necessity, worked between government and non-government organisations, many other Australian women turned to the non-government sector as a vehicle for leading change. A primary example in this collection is Melanie Oppenheimer’s account of Lady Helen Munro Ferguson, the wife of Australia’s sixth governor-general and a key founder and administrator of the Australian branch of the British Red Cross Society from 1914. Munro Ferguson drew on her experience in philanthropy and her vice-regal authority and status to found and lead the organisation during World War 1, when it was responsible for raising enormous amounts of money and collecting and distributing large quantities of goods to be sent to the armed forces. She efficiently managed million-pound budgets during this period in the face of concerted resistance from men on her committee who continued to insist against all evidence to the contrary that no woman had the necessary business skills to manage large amounts of money. She also mentored a number of women who subsequently led the organisation in Australia. Lady Munro Ferguson continued to represent the Australian Red Cross abroad after leaving Australia, her ongoing work in the 1930s driven by a strong commitment to international co-operation.

Constance Duncan was another staunch internationalist, who, in this case, honed her leadership skills through organisations in both Australia and Asia. Duncan rose through the ranks of the Australian Student Christian Movement to spend almost a decade at the Young Women’s Christian Association in Japan, before later working for a range of institutions, including the League of Nations Union. In her chapter on Duncan, Ellen Warne highlights these experiences as well as her efforts back in Australia in public broadcasting and education, but she also stresses her wartime and post-war work in government, and later the UN, finding innovative and practical solutions for refugees and for women trying to manage families in difficult situations.

Ada Norris also focused on post-war refugee and immigration issues at national and international levels, as well as on a wide range of matters to do with the status of women. As Judith Smart shows, she had a considerable impact on mainstream Australian feminism prior to 1980 as president of the Victorian and Australian National Councils of Women, thus representing the voices of over a million Australian women in the affiliated organisations. She was appointed to the Commonwealth Immigration Advisory Council and was
the convener of both the ANCW and the International Council of Women’s standing committees on migration. In the early 1960s, Norris’s leadership in women’s issues led to her selection as Australian delegate to the United Nations Status of Women Commission for three consecutive sessions, and, in 1975, to her appointment as chair of the United Nations Association of Australia’s national committee for International Women’s Year, later extended to encompass the decade. In 1969 she presented the equal pay case for the ANCW to the Arbitration Court. Though undoubtedly confident about her leadership skills, Norris did not see her position as a source of personal power; she remained committed to the importance of information sharing and provision as a means of bringing about change, never forgetting the need to bring the large numbers of women she led along with her rather than trying to force decisions upon them.

Another leading figure in non-government women’s organisations who also revealed a passion for international co-operation completes this collection. Kathleen ‘Kay’ Gordon Cameron was state president of the Country Women’s Association from 1961 to 1963 and national president from 1963 to 1965. Karen Crook’s study of Cameron’s life reveals a community leader with a commitment to enhancing women’s citizenship, as well as promoting conservation and international understanding, and one who fought hard to educate the public about the issues facing Australia and the world. Crook shows how Cameron’s leadership style, and that of others who rose through the ranks of the CWA, was shaped by the leadership group as a whole through a process of nurturing and mentoring new members as they took on positions of responsibility.

As this brief overview of the volume indicates, many of the women in this book faced similar challenges as they sought to move outside traditional female roles and to position women’s concerns more centrally in public life. Those who moved too far into the domain of men faced significant difficulties as they sought to establish themselves. Others struggled to draw attention to and gain credibility for issues, such as social welfare, that had traditionally been sidelined as ‘women’s work’. Many learnt their leadership styles from other women, or developed new styles in co-operation with those who supported them in their endeavours. Many shared an interest in women’s issues, in children, in social welfare more generally and in social justice. For many, international activism complemented their work at local and national levels or provided expertise and information to assist and broaden the local work of others.
As much as the stories told here highlight the similarity of challenges facing Australian women in the 20th century and the depth and breadth of their work, they also show there is no one way that women have led or will lead in the future, for leadership is both historically contingent—linked to social mores and changing legal and political institutions among other things—and related to individual experience, inclination, opportunity, belief, class and cultural preferences, as well as gender. While these essays show that women have challenged and questioned conventional hierarchical models of leadership, they do not reveal a clear alternative feminine style. Though it is possible to detect a general preference for networking and collaboration in most of the examples of leadership detailed here, this has not been universal among 20th-century women leaders. In this variety, as in so many other aspects of scholarship relating to women over the past 40 years, the evidence points away from essentialism to difference, away from uniformity and simplicity to inconsistency and complexity.