Entry type: Person
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Wildman, Alexina Maude

(1867 - 1896)

Born	18670228, Paddington New South Wales Australia
Died	18961115, Waverley New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Journalist, Print journalist, Satirist

Summary

Alexina Wildman spent all of her short but successful career in journalism working as a columnist on the *Bulletin.* Her weekly column, written under the pseudonym of ‘Sappho Smith’ and headed by a Phil May cartoon, appeared from 28 April 1888 to 22 August 1896. It was Sydney’s first gossip column: an acerbic, heavily satirical and bitingly funny account of society’s comings and goings in the form of a letter from the fictitious Sappho to her ‘dear Moorabinda’. The segment became one of the most popular in the *Bulletin* and appeared without interruption for over eight years, ending only with the premature death of its author. Wildman died of nephritis in November 1896, aged 29.

Often referred to as ‘the incomparable Ina Wildman’, she was celebrated by her colleagues as a brilliant writer and a good comrade. Her brief, bright career was an encouragement to many women journalists.

Details

Alexina Wildman was the eleventh child of English parents Edwin Wildman, clerk, and Elizabeth (nee Stevens). She began writing as a schoolgirl, and regularly contributed poetry and prose to the *Bulletin*. In April 1888, at the age of 19, the precocious Wildman began to write her weekly column for the journal.

Sappho’s first letter, published 28 April 1888, ranged in subject matter from Lord and Lady Carington’s Norfolk Island visit, to the very wealthy Sydney family who had appropriated an ancient coat of arms, the rightful owner of which was ‘considerably astonished and highly exasperated in a well-bred way at what he considered a piece of consummate impertinence’. As part of her commentary on the latest in women’s fashion, she noted that ‘the *regime terrible* of the décolleté toilette is likely to continue, the next fashion for full evening dress being the old-fashioned Bertha, and that reveals more bony back – scraggy ‘salt-cellars’ – and pipe-stem arms than the present style. A woman in a Bertha looks like cold fowl – it gives quite a ‘garnished’ effect to feminine loveliness’. She ended the letter with ‘a medley made up of all sorts of things that are running through my head’: the marriage of a Sydney literary man ‘of faintly poetic and dramatic tendencies’ to the daughter of a newspaper proprietor; the preference of ‘all the Melbourne girls who have hair’ to wear it loose, copying Lady Loch’s daughters; the popularity of opaline as a tint; the opening of a butter shop in London by the Duchess of Hamilton, and the frightening possibility of the ladies of Potts Point following suit by running colonial wine stores (‘if so, some of the leaders of fashion will be by no means maladroit at bottle-opening’); and the new fad for taking tea, not from a teapot but from perforated silver balls filled with tea leaves and ‘attached to a chain like an infinitesimal dog-fastener’.

The following month, Sappho was offering fresh gossip (‘I hear that a resplendent youth with much money and possessed of an ancestral hall on the confines of Woolloomooloo, has gone and married a nymph of the pavement’), and commentary on social events, past and future. She noted that the annual St. Vincent’s Hospital ball would be held on June 13th: ‘To dance anyhow is to do well, but to dance in aid of human suffering is to do better, therefore I always go’. She recounted a visit to the theatre:

If the theory that whenever one gets into a ‘wax’ an unseen influence snips ten years off one’s life is true, your own Sappho hasn’t much longer to meander across this paper, for the other night I got into quite a rage at the theatre (I won’t use a more distinguishing adjective!) and over what do you think? Why our national nuisance, the tyro in music of the sex that does its hair up. I was unfortunate enough to be placed immediately behind one of these. In her bony, ungloved left hand she carried the vocal score – with her bony right forefinger she *one*, two there’d, *one*, two there’d in time to the orchestra till I thought I’d either go mad or stab her with a hairpin… I’m perfectly positive that that woman (she’s by no means singular, though!) has no more real harmony in her soul than has a tram-motor!

Sappho’s most vicious remarks were often directed toward women, and those involved in the suffrage movement bore the brunt of

her jokes more than once. She aimed fire at those ‘lady writers’ in the newspapers who sent word to England that the colony required more governesses (‘we are squeaking out for feminine *manual* labour if we are squeaking at all, but we don’t want any more semi-educated beings called “nursery governesses”‘); also, those women who followed the trend to have risqué posture-photographs taken (the images, she said, adorned the walls of galleries where ‘strangers steal in and ogle the revealed charms or scrag of Adeline de Toorak or Maude de Potts Point’); and she particularly disdained women who refused to eat for the sake of appearances:

And now that balls are to be once more set a-rolling, I would warn those girls who think to captivate men by the display of an appetite the size of a sickly butterfly’s, that the average man doesn’t approve of a girl who takes a spoonful of jelly and a sip of liquid and is ready to be taken back to the ball-room again. No, they don’t. The men want time to refresh themselves, too. They like a girl who negotiates something tangible with a knife and fork, and gives them time to surround a due and proper amount of cold fowl and champagne. Speaking of ball suppers: At a Wagga hop the other week one of the M.C.’s attacked a calves foot jelly with a knife and fork, after he had copiously *peppered and salted it*! What do you think of that, now? That Wagga man almost outdoes the Frenchman whom I once saw mix rhubarb with mashed potatoes.

Suffragists and so-called ‘new women’ were frequently in her sights. She warned them, for instance, against the dangers of bike riding, because it advertised how women were configured below the waste:

Even if it doesn’t hurt the woman herself it checks the possible innocence of hobbledehoys here and there who might think that women tapered off into mermaid’s tails if they did not seek to violently prove the contrary. If the New Woman could only be got to see it, one of the Old Woman’s very strongest points was that she (in the Queen of Sheba sense) had no legs! The New Woman should think hard ere she finally decides to let the world know that she is supported on forks.

Sappho was, of course, equally capable of satirizing men. A letter on May 19, 1888, read:

The hunting season was opened last Saturday by the members of the Sydney Hunt Club, the run commencing at Ermington and finishing at Ryde. One equestrienne and nine equestrians showed up, and only one accident occurred, and it didn’t happen to the lady (Miss Smith) but to Mr Simpson, a visitor, who was in such a hurry to negotiate a rather stiff fence that he went over ahead of his horse and left that animal with a pained expression on its face on the wrong side. The Club intend proceeding to Bathurst at an early date to hunt a real live stag which they are carefully tending up there to allow of its being chased as soon as possible. The Sydney H. Club want to give the Western sportsmen the joy of a day with the hounds as a slight return for the quarry. Bathurst ‘sports’ ought to be good riders, for it has just struck me that if they are genuine Bathurst burrs they should be able to stick to anything.

She followed this in June, with:

Everybody is asking why men don’t marry. Not being a man, I can’t answer this knotty question, but I think the reason why the girls who went to a certain suburban Amateur Athletic Club’s sports on the 19th isn’t don’t marry is because they aren’t brave enough to link themselves to so invalid and declining a generation. When these noble athletics stripped for the fray, a sorry scene of pipe-stem legs, ‘champagne’ shoulders, faces pale as pie-crust, and hollow coughs, prefaced most of the events. A man requires muscle to be married. If you don’t think so, ask a certain newspaper-man who took his wife to a recent ball. At this whirl of gladness a total stranger of the sex that shaves behaved to Mrs. Newspaper Man in a manner which failed to meet the approbation of her hubby, who, having inveigled the clownish one by soft words and gentle wiles into a private room, then and there administered what has been described to me as ‘a grandfather of a licking’.

The Sappho Smith column often ran to a full page of the *Bulletin*, and kept its sassy style right through to the end. A letter on 8 August 1896 recounted a display of diamonds at the Masonic ball that was ‘simply paralysing. One lady in ruby plush must have been worth half Coolgardie, if all her stones were genuine; and a prominent bookie’s wife, in pink silk, sported a really glorious diamond necklace – every stone in it an eloquent sermon to punters’. The final letter was published on 22 August that year. There was no mention of it being Sappho’s last gasp, and there was no note to readers the following week. Wildman and her Sappho Smith simply disappeared.

Events

1888 - 1896
Career in journalism active

Published resources

Resource Section
Wildman, Alexina Maude (1867-1896), Roe, J. I., 2006,
http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A120545b.htm

Book
Pen portraits : women writers and journalists in nineteenth century Australia, Clarke, Patricia, 1988

The Journalistic Javelin: An Illustrated History of the Bulletin, Rolfe, Patricia, 1979

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition
The Women's Pages: Australian Women and Journalism since 1850, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2008,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/cal/cal-home.html

Archival resources

Mitchell and Dixson Libraries Manuscripts Collection
Dowell O'Reilly - Papers, 1884-1923, with additional family papers, 1877-1944

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