Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE3823

Wright, Claudia

(1934 - 2005)

Born	19340617, Bendigo Victoria Australia
Died	20050129, Melbourne Victoria Australia
Occupation	Journalist, Print journalist, Radio Journalist, Television Journalist

Summary

Claudia Wright was a trailblazer for talkback radio in Melbourne, Victoria, in the 1970s. A committed feminist and fighter for social justice, she worked in print, radio and television journalism throughout the 1960s, 70s and 80s until she was affected by the early onset of Alzheimer’s disease. Even when ill, she allowed herself to be the subject of documentaries that brought attention to the impact of the disease on patients and their carers.

Details

Claudia Wright resigned from Melbourne Radio Station 3AW, during an on-air broadcast, in February 1977, when she was at the peak of the Melbourne media ratings, and one of the two most widely listened-to radio broadcasters in Australia. (The other was John Laws of Sydney.) She announced there had been a campaign to sack her, and that she would rather resign in protest than tolerate the lack of support from the Macquarie network.

The clash which led to her resignation began in late 1976, after a fiery run-in with the Macquarie network's advertisers, ethnic and religious lobby groups, and a change of station manager, who was fearful of her role in controversial broadcasts relating to Catholic Church doctrine, the Arab-Israeli conflict, language acceptable for public broadcast, and other issues.

In response to Bishop Fox of Sale's denunciation of divorce, contraception, abortion and other 'moral perversions' at a Catholic women's conference, Wright urged women in her radio and television broadcasts to fight back, criticising the 'narrow views of the 'antique Catholics'. The church fought back and Claudia, in particular, was targeted for special criticism due to what Father Patrick Murray of Drouin described as her use of 'coarse speech and emotional screeching to talk down her opponents'. Pulpit sermons were ordered by the Church, calling on Catholic advertisers to withdraw their advertisements from 3AW.

Following an on-air debate between Father Murray and Wright, mediated by John Tingle, which the station promoted to the hilt and which was one of the most highly rated broadcasts of the time, various sponsors threatened to withdraw their advertising. A number of controversial broadcasts followed, including one where she made satirical comments about Governor-general Sir John Kerr's wife. She had broadcast and written acerbically about the "constitutional putsch" of November 1975, in which Kerr had dismissed the Labour Prime Minister Gough Whitlam.

Whitlam was one of Claudia's long-time supporters, and he and many others joined the public protests that ensued, after the February 1977 resignation. Wright told the station manager to "fuck off" as she left the station-door. She wore her sacking as a badge of honour, later telling a journalist from the Melbourne Age that she regarded it as '…a compliment…a perverse recognition of my talent.' Broadcasting in order to tell people how to 'bake cakes and cut their chook's toenails' was simply not Claudia Wright's scene.

So what was Claudia Wright's scene? The statement issued after her sacking by the Women's Liberation Movement gives us more than a subtle hint. Calling for her reinstatement, the spokeswoman for the movement alleged that she was:

'the latest in a long list of articulate women who had been robbed of their livelihood because they spoke the truth about women in society…for women everywhere who had not voice, Claudia was that voice.'

Claudia Wright's 'scene' was to provide a platform for 'the underdog' to have her day. Whether it was convincing the Macquarie network management to broadcast live for twelve hours from the 1975 Women and Politics Conference in Canberra, highlighting concerns about East Timor in the mid 1970s, discussing such taboo subjects as incest and rape on prime-time radio, or using the word 'cunt' on air in a poetry reading and interview with Anne Summers about her new feminist history 'Damned Whores and God's Police' (an utterance ruled permissible by the broadcasting authority because it was 'in context'), Claudia Wright was committed to creating radical news, in a responsible fashion. Off air, and without public fanfare, she met regularly with prisoners at Melbourne's Pentridge prison; helped publicize women's health and self-help organizations to deal with breast and cervical cancer, and marital violence; assisted the campaign for the "disappeared", victims of the military junta in Argentina; supported the East Timorese refugee organizations; and assisted her home-town and its Chinese community.

A product of her times, her journalism reflected the enormous social changes of the 1960s and 70s, especially as they impacted feminism and political life in Australia. And, as her good friend and former radio producer, Julie Copeland, said after her death in 2005:

'There was no-one else quite like her – we got away with probably doing the most radical programs ever heard on commercial radio – I don't think we'll see her like again'.

Claudia Wright was born in Bendigo in 1934. Of poor, multicultural stock (her grandmother was Chinese), she attended school in Bendigo and worked her way up the journalist ladder, her first foothold being a job with the local Bendigo paper. From there, she moved to the Melbourne Herald, and worked on the paper's fashion and social pages, eventually taking on the role of editor of the Women's Section. New to Melbourne society, she took great delight in critiquing the conduct, hypocrisies and corruption of some its members, especially the vice-regal pretensions of the Government House set. She hobnobbed with them at the Melbourne Cup, was great friends with some of the most influential among them, making writers as well as friends of some like Lilian Frank, despite their political differences.

After creating a profile and public following at the Herald, she was ousted by Rupert Murdoch, the newspaper proprietor, after there were complaints that she was giving voice to causes that had not been publicized in the Melbourne media before. Murdoch then asked her to serve as a special reporter for the London wedding of the Prince of Wales and Princess Diana. She told Murdoch no, and excoriated him in public print for years. She remained on friendly terms, however, with Prince Charles. Thirty years later, she returned to attack Murdoch, and in one of the last acts of her life, as she was dying, she authorized a defamation suit against Murdoch's paper, the London Times, for reporting, falsely, that she had been a Soviet spy.

After leaving the Herald, she moved to join Melbourne radio station 3AW. One of a team of morning presenters that included radio stalwarts Ormsby Wilkins and Norman Banks, Claudia (or Claws as she was widely nicknamed) contributed to a program that consistently topped the morning ratings for many years. Listeners loved Claudia, or loved to hate her. In particular, they loved to tune in at 8:30 am to conversations/arguments between Norman Banks and Claudia. Although Banks did not conceal his public and personal animosity, Claudia did not reciprocate, and acknowledged privately that she felt sorry for Banks. Radio was never boring when Claudia was involved, because Claudia herself got bored easily, a characteristic that made her a challenge to produce for at times.

Claudia asserted her feminist politics loudly and proudly; as indicated by the protests against her sacking, her position at the pulpit was greatly appreciated by the majority of feminists. There were some in the movement, however, who didn't entirely approve of her because, despite her feminist credentials, Claudia committed the cardinal sin of attending to her appearance. Claudia was attractive, stylish and glamorous – she wore make-up, jewellery, and couture clothes. She saw no reason why maintaining appearance conflicted with feminist aims, and this sat uncomfortably with some feminists of the time. She was a career-long friend of Germaine Greer, and of US and UK leaders of the feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s.

Between her run-in with the Catholics and her resignation in 1977, Claudia travelled to the Middle East, where she reported sympathetically on the Palestinian position and interviewed Arab leaders, including Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, Yasser Arafat of the PLO, and leaders of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Oman, becoming one of the first western journalists to do so. She also interviewed prominent Israelis, such as General Moshe Dayan.

At the time of her exit from 3AW in 1977, she was living with her husband, John Helmer, with whom she had a son, Catullus. She had two other children with first husband, journalist Geoffrey Wright. She moved to the United States, settling in Washington D.C., where she broadcast occasionally on National Public Radio, and was the Washington correspondent for New Statesman, for the French Catholic weekly, Temoignage Chretien, and for the leading Greek newspaper, Ta Nea. Her work was published in many of the leading US newspapers, including the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and Washington Post, as well as in the leading foreign policy journals of the US, including Foreign Affairs. She was honoured with the award of a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship at the US Smithsonian Institution.

In 1983, although she was diagnosed with thyroid cancer, she delayed a life-saving operation, in order to return to Melbourne at the invitation of 3AW, and present a series of 4-hour morning radio programs during the six-week summer season. She replaced presenter Derryn Hinch, who, out-rated, tried to sabotage her return. Her last active journalistic link with Australia was as Washington correspondent for Vogue.

Her radical journalism resulted in her being accused of treason in the Australian Senate in the early 1980s, and then, in later years, in bizarre accusations about her being a spy for the Soviets. Her accuser, a KGB major, who was dismissed from his service for alcoholism, had been incensed when his superiors listened to tape-recordings, in which Claudia had told her husband of the agent's attempt to grope her sexually at a restaurant in Moscow. On the tape, Claudia was heard to say that she had told the agent to "get that little thing out of me".

Published retractions and apologies in the UK and London put an end to the claims, until they were resurrected in the Times in January of 2005, when the newspaper was promoting a new book by one of its correspondents, and believed Claudia was dead, and therefore safe to libel.

The two rounds of allegations came at a time when her ability to speak for herself about them was limited. In 1988, Claudia Wright was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease; she was just 54 at the time. Her treatment was aided by experimental drugs provided by her friend, the Prime Minister of Greece, Andreas Papandreou.

She lived with the illness for another seventeen years. During that time, she was, characteristically, far from silent. Through the "Sixty Minutes" television programme, she organized the first ever-television documentaries in Australia to show what impact the disease was having on her, launching thereby a national campaign for funds to aid Alzheimer's Disease research. That fund is ongoing at the Mental Health Research Institute of Victoria.

She also fought against the conditions of her hospitalization, and for the rights of institutional patients, taking to tribunal hearings the Presbyterian Church, which operated the centre where she spent her last decade, as well as the Victorian state Office of Public Advocate and the Guardianship and Administration Board, for mistreatment. Her claims were all dismissed.

It was an unfair and unfitting last chapter for an incredibly fit woman with a powerful commitment to giving the unvoiced a voice.

Her grave is in the village cemetery of White Hills, where her Chinese relatives also lie, outside Bendigo. A memorial service was held the week after her death, on February 5, 2005, at Como House, which was across the street from Claudia's last Australian home, and over-looked the park where she would jog every morning. A film compilation by her son Catullus, including excerpts of the famous 1976 radio debate with the Catholic priest, was presented. Eulogies were given by London writers Greer and Scarthe Flett; Helmer; Copeland; and Frank.

A death notice placed in the New York Times on February 3rd 2005 in a few well chosen words told the world exactly what Claudia Wright's scene was: 'She wrote, she fought, she loved.'

Events

1960 - 1990
Career in journalism active

Published resources

Resource
Vale Claudia Wright, ABC Radio Overnights Program, 2005,
http://www.abc.net.au/overnights/stories/s1299213.htm

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Documentary Film
Alzheimer's and Claudia Wright, Alec Hodgkinson, 1999

Claudia, Jeff McMullen, 1990

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

State Library of Victoria
Claudia Wright interviewing Mr John Kaputin, Port Moresby, New Guinea [picture]

National Film and Sound Archive
A Current Affair. 1975.09.19

National Library of Australia
[Biographical cuttings on Claudia Wright, journalist, containing one or more cuttings from newspapers or journals]

Author Details
Nikki Henningham

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