

Gender Violence in Australia: Historical Perspectives

Edited by Alana Piper and Ana Stevenson
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Reviewed by Michelle Arrow

I REMEMBER THE EXCITEMENT IN THE HISTORY COMMUNITY WHEN THE AUSTRALIAN Women's History Network's VIDA blog was launched in 2016. Under the creative editorship of co-founders Ana Stevenson and Alana Piper, the blog quickly became a vibrant site for scholars to share their research, to connect feminist history to present-day concerns, and to share stories about their working lives as historians. Through the blog, Ana and Alana fostered a cross-institutional, online feminist history community. Their edited book, *Gender Violence in Australia: Historical Perspectives*, is further evidence of this productive labour.

Gender Violence in Australia emerged from a series on the blog, timed to coincide with international commemorations for the 'sixteen days of activism against gender violence' ('Series'), first published in late 2016. The series gathered momentum with each new post, historicising and questioning the ubiquity of gender-based violence, and many of the blog's contributors have written chapters for this book. Piper and Stevenson have assembled a terrific group of contributors at a range of career stages and the focus on gender violence, rather than a narrower framing of 'sexual violence' or 'domestic violence', has produced a wide-ranging collection that offers ample evidence of surging scholarly interest in histories of gender violence.

When historians write the history of the mid-2010s in Australia, renewed public concern and discussion about gender violence will surely be seen one of the era's defining features. This revived interest in gender and family violence has been prompted by several factors: the large-scale exposure of child abuse within institutions and the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2013-2017) were certainly crucial, but perhaps more than any other single event, it was the murder of Luke Batty by his estranged father in February 2014, and his mother Rosie's activism on the issue of family violence that placed the issue on the national agenda. Rosie Batty was named Australian of the Year in 2015 and media studies scholars have argued that her interventions on the issue

created what they called the 'Rosie Batty effect', galvanising public interest in domestic abuse and violence (Hawley, Clifford and Konkes). Her advocacy influenced the creation of a government inquiry into domestic violence in Queensland (2014-15) and a Royal Commission on Domestic Violence in Victoria (2015-17). Contemporary interest in these confounding and intractable problems has generated important research with wide-ranging public impact: Jess Hill's investigation of domestic abuse, *See What You Made Me Do* (2019) recently became the first work of journalism to win the Stella Prize for women's writing. *Gender Violence in Australia*, then, is part of a new wave of historical engagements with this persistent social problem.

Historians have a critical role to play in the broader conversation about gender violence, and this book suggests a number of ways they might contribute. In a funding and research climate where we are increasingly required to demonstrate the impact and benefit of our research, applying historical perspectives to contemporary issues is a way to satisfy these demands for 'useful' history. I was thinking about the pitfalls and opportunities of this current moment for historians of violence when I was reading this book: how can historians find a position between presenting gender violence as persistent but not monolithic? How can we understand gender violence in the past as historically contingent and specific? Can historians of violence provide us with examples of sites where gender violence was successfully challenged?

Stevenson and Piper have divided the collection's fourteen chapters into three thematic sections: Gender violence in the home, gender violence in the community, and activism against gender violence. Zora Simic's generous and nuanced reading of the historiography of domestic violence opens the book, retracing the connections between activism and history writing with a focus on the pathbreaking work of Judith Allen and Kay Saunders. Simic also raises a number of crucial questions for any historian of domestic or gender violence, including the need for intersectional analyses, the importance of historicising feminist knowledge about domestic violence, and attention to evidentiary silences. The chapters that follow each address one or more of these questions, in a diverse array of historical contexts. Drawing on a larger historical project in collaboration with family historians, Tanya Evans investigates the ways that stories of domestic violence uncovered in family history research can profoundly disrupt normative narratives about family life in both the past and present. Similarly, Alana Piper's chapter about economic abuse as an aspect of domestic violence brings new questions from contemporary understandings of domestic abuse to bear on the past, revealing the ways that present-day activism and analysis can open up new areas of historical inquiry.

One of the book's key strengths is the diversity of approaches undertaken, and the range of evidence that the contributors draw on. Several scholars investigate gender violence through the evidence generated by the law: Lisa Durnian and Andy Kaladelfos both conduct careful analysis of the treatment of gender violence in the criminal justice system. Lisa Featherstone examines the process of reform by which a form of gender violence—rape in marriage—was problematised and ultimately, criminalised in the 1980s and 1990s. Drawing on an archive of oral histories, Rebecca Jennings draws out the ways in which family and sexual violence impacted on the lives of lesbian women in postwar Sydney in numerous ways. Shurlee Swain re-reads the records of government inquiries into child abuse in institutional care settings against the backdrop of feminist activism to confirm that the patterns of abuse in these settings was gendered, even if it was not always presented that way in the media coverage of these inquiries. Liz Conor undertakes a careful, intersectional reading of cultural sources—in this instance, the changing iterations of the figure of 'The Drover's Boy'—to reveal the ways this construct has been used to mask the reality of the colonial frontier as a 'rapescape'. It is an exceptional, unsettling piece of scholarship.

The final section of the book considers histories of activism against gender violence. Each of these chapters reflects broader patterns in women's movement activist energy. In a wide-ranging chapter, Stevenson and Brigette Lewis examine feminist print and digital media responses to gender violence, drawing a thread of continuity from Louisa Lawson's *Dawn* newspaper in the late nineteenth century, women's liberation periodicals of the 1970s and 1980s, and twitter hashtags in the twenty first century. Mary Tomsic's chapter considers the cultural dimensions of women's liberation activism, examining a series of experimental feminist films made between the 1970s and 1980s to reveal the undercurrent of gendered violence that ripples through each of them. In doing so, Tomsic demonstrates the ways in which violence was a persistent concern for feminists across the period. Jacqui Theobald and Suellen Murray's chapter on the women's refuge movement in Victoria charts the ways in which the women's movement engaged with the state to ensure support for the women's refuge sector. They demonstrate that this strategy achieved some significant gains for domestic violence services in Victoria (unfortunately, services in other states such as NSW have not fared as well over the same period) (Bullen).

At the close of their introduction to *Gender Violence in Australia*, Piper and Stevenson declare that the histories of gender violence in the book are a 'rallying cry'. The book certainly shows how the heightened public discussion of domestic violence has been enormously generative for historical research, and it has encouraged many of us to think about how our research connects to a broader activist politics. Yet I think it is also worth considering the ways in which an activist framework or orientation towards the past might potentially curtail the

possibilities of historical research. A focus on the historical experiences of victims and survivors is crucial, as is an emphasis on moments, and movements, of resistance to gender violence. All of these histories are incredibly important for survivors and for the support services that operate in the sector today. But a history of gender violence might also require us to historicise the experiences of perpetrators, as well as the social, cultural and legal frameworks in which they have operated in over time. To take just one example: the father's rights movement in Australia was enormously influential on successive family law reforms in the 1990s and 2000s, yet we know remarkably little about its history. Of course, this is one of the reasons that edited collections like this one are so valuable: not only do they capture a moment in time, but they open up new questions and suggest new areas for investigation in productive and urgent ways. *Gender Violence in Australia* is a powerful contribution to the Australian public conversation about an urgent social problem.

MICHELLE ARROW is a professor of history at Macquarie University. She is the author of three books, most recently *The Seventies: The Personal, the Political and the Making of Modern Australia* (NewSouth, 2019) which won the 2020 Ernest Scott Prize for History.

Works Cited

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