Popular Patriarchy in the 1950s: Ronald McKie’s Women’s Weekly Writing

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Analysis of fictionalising techniques used by leading journalist Ronald McKie in his 1950s Women’s Weekly articles supports the transfer of Betty Friedan’s observations about American women’s magazines to this Australian publication, and exemplifies the seamlessness of patriarchal and capitalist ideology in the era. These techniques include McKie’s adoption of a mild, out-of-character writing persona, stereotyping of women, attribution of unrestricted judging rights to the ‘male gaze’, and faith in the invulnerability, benevolence and intelligence of male interviewees. Conversely, McKie’s interviews with women prioritise nurturing and house-keeping skills, appearance, and above all consumerism, as means for reconciling Australian women to housework in the suburbs. Dilettante discussions of artistic and scientific subjects deflect women readers’ attention from formal education as a path to personal fulfilment and financial independence. McKie’s interviews with exceptional women, such as Leonie Kramer and Sadie Orr, further neutralise potential fissures in the Feminine Mystique and in the Beauty Myth, as retrospectively defined by Naomi Wolf.

Introducing McKie

Ronald McKie is remembered today as the writer of the Australian commemorative war histories, Proud Echo (1953) and The Heroes (1960), and as the winner of the 1975 Miles Franklin Award for his novel The Mango Tree. McKie’s second novel, The Crushing, set like The Mango Tree in regional Queensland, was published in 1977, and a third, Bitter Bread, set in late-Depression Melbourne, in 1978. In 1977 a film was made of The Mango Tree, while in 1989 and 1990 The Heroes was the basis of a television series and telemovie.¹

Born in Toowoomba on 11 December 1909, and educated at Bundaberg state schools and Brisbane Grammar, McKie trained as a journalist with the Brisbane Daily Mail. He worked briefly for the Sydney Morning Herald and the Daily Telegraph and as press secretary to former Prime Minister Billy Hughes. In October 1937 appointment as a journalist to the Singapore Straits Times inspired his lifelong interest in Asian history and culture. After serving briefly in the AIF, he reported the late phases of World War II as a correspondent for the Daily Telegraph and the London Evening

Standard. After the war McKie’s career as a journalist, popular war historian and travel writer took him to most parts of Australia, and to New Zealand, Malaysia, Singapore and Bali. Of McKie’s twelve published books, *Echoes of Forgotten Wars*, based on his experiences as a correspondent, and *We Have No Dreaming*, a bicentennial analysis in the tradition of Donald Horne’s *The Lucky Country*, post-dated his formal fiction writing.\(^2\) After residing sequentially in Paddington, Moss Vale, Bowral and Camberwell, McKie died in Canterbury Victoria on 8 May 1991.\(^3\)

McKie’s books and journalism helped to shape Australian cultural attitudes from 1942, when his first book, on pre-war Singapore,\(^4\) was published, into the 1980s. His novels attracted critical attention during the 1970s and more recently,\(^5\) but no attempt has yet been made to trace the ideological impact of his journalism. This essay is a first step towards filling this gap.

**McKie and the *Australian Women’s Weekly***

Between 20 February 1957 and 17 August 1960 McKie contributed a hundred articles to the *Australian Women’s Weekly*.\(^6\) At its peak in the late 1950s, McKie’s reputation gave him access to key figures as interviewees, and authorised him to comment on projects and events that defined the era in Australia. He wrote for the *Women’s Weekly* during its most successful period, when, according to the owner Frank Packer, revenue from its cover price and advertising ‘paid everyone’s salary’, meaning the staff of magazines and newspapers, including the *Sydney Telegraph*, published by Australian Consolidated Press. Packer oversaw production, but the hands-on editors were a succession of talented women. From 1950 to 1972 the editor was Esmé Fenston, a clever, innately conservative woman who declared that the magazine ‘did not attempt to lead public taste, but merely reflected it’.\(^7\) Fenston worked closely with Packer, so that the *Weekly*’s chain of command paralleled Betty Friedan’s first-hand observation of American women’s magazines:

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\(^4\) Ronald McKie, *This Was Singapore*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1942.


\(^6\) Readers of this essay can access a complete collection of McKie’s *Women’s Weekly* articles through the National Library’s Trove: Sunbird (Cheryl Taylor), ‘McKie’s *Women’s Weekly* Articles’, 2012: http://trove.nla.gov.au/list?id=3160, (accessed 27 November 2012). The footnotes below give Trove URLs of McKie’s individual articles for readers to consult. The photos that accompany McKie’s *Women’s Weekly* articles are an important part of their message.

Today, the deciding voice on most of these magazines is cast by men. Women often carry out the formulas, women edit the housewife ‘service’ departments, but the formulas themselves, which have dictated the new housewife image, are the product of men’s minds.8

Sales of the Women’s Weekly were robust throughout Fenston’s tenure, and some issues, such as those about the royal family, sold nearly a million copies—an astonishing number for an Australian population that stayed under ten million throughout the 1950s.9 The Weekly’s popularity and consequent success as a vehicle for capitalism and patriarchy were partly due to its upbeat and cheerful tone, which McKie’s contributions maintain. McKie’s extensive autobiographical writings seem to reveal everything about his public life, but they make no mention of his Women’s Weekly contributions, in which his fictionalised writing persona contradicted his established identity as a promoter of and participant in masculine achievements in war, politics and travel. Earlier Studies and Statement of Argument

First published in 1963, Betty Friedan’s passionate exposé of the patriarchal determinants of American women’s magazines has been modified and extended, but never dismissed, by later researchers. Writing in the 1990s for a new generation of women, Joanne Meyerowitz argued that 1950s and ’60s magazines did not exclusively urge women’s confinement to the domestic sphere, but also encouraged financial independence and fulfilment of their talents through paid work.10 In the same decade Naomi Wolf analysed women’s imposed obligation to be sexually attractive as enforcing a time-consuming and costly cultivation of their appearance by working and professional women, under a Beauty Myth had been ‘perfected to checkmate power at every level in individual women’s lives’.11 Wolf expanded Friedan’s observations by stating that since the 1860s ‘women’s magazines accompanied women’s advances and the simultaneous evolution of the beauty myth’ (p. 62). She claimed further that in the 1950s, these same magazines’ promotion of a woman’s ‘ideal self’ supported both the post-war re-assignment of women to domesticity, and an economy that depended on spiralling consumption.12

Later in Australia a book by Susan Sheridan, Barbara Baird, Kate Borrett and Lyndall Ryan that specifically targeted the Women’s Weekly traced the ‘changing and complex definitions’ of ‘the Australian woman’ that the magazine offered its readers

8 Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique: 50 Years, New York, W. W. Norton, 2013, p. 49. Friedan’s observations on 1950s American women’s magazines find a parallel in Virginia Woolf’s comment on a London newspaper in the 1920s: ‘The most transient visitor to this planet, I thought, who picked up this paper could not fail to be aware, even from this scattered testimony, that England is under the rule of a patriarchy’ (A Room of One’s Own; Three Guineas, ed. Morag Shiach, World’s Classics, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 43).

9 Published monthly since 1982, in 2015 the Weekly boasts a readership of ‘1,757,000’, with ‘over 100,000 subscribers’. Its formulas for attracting readers seem not to have changed much since the 1950s: http://www.bauer-media.com.au/brands/the-australian-women-s-weekly/.


12 The Beauty Myth, pp. 63-64.
after World War II. This collaborative study followed Janice Winship’s highlighting of women’s agency in integrating the ideas of popular culture, and argued that ‘women’s role as consumers placed them at the centre, not the periphery, of capitalist societies in the second half of the twentieth century.

This essay focuses on the contributions that a writer self-defined as a daring reporter and ‘man’s man’ made to the Women’s Weekly during the late 1950s. Ronald McKie’s place is on the conservative wing of the Weekly’s ever-shifting contingent of male and female contributors. His body of work therefore tends to contradict the moderating of Friedan’s initial theses that has been attempted by later researchers. McKie’s articles do indeed, as Sheridan claims for the magazine as a whole, promote women’s role as consumers, but for McKie this potential female empowerment is subject to surveillance by husbands, who as earners control the nuclear family’s finances. I contend further that McKie’s writing in the Weekly leaves no room for women readers’ agency or for their realisation as individuals enabled to participate and create beyond the domestic, nurturing and sexual spheres. The following discussion uncovers the fictionalising techniques by which McKie’s articles create a seamless and all-encompassing gender ideology that functions to limit the life choices and experience of the Weekly’s women readers.

McKie knew Frank Packer well, and it may reflect Packer’s oversight that McKie’s disingenuous self-projections in the Weekly as a humble student and devotee of womankind, which are the opposite of his customary writing persona, misrepresent men’s sexual attraction to women as a source of female power. By giving unrestricted scope to his ‘gaze’ as a reporter and to that of his male interviewees, McKie further validates sexist assumptions and boosts the confidence of the Weekly’s reputedly ‘strong male readership’. Concomitantly, his interviews with men soften the images of patriarchy and capitalism by promoting the apparent

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15 Sheridan, Who Was that Woman?, p. 5.
16 We Have No Dreaming recalls McKie’s years as a staff reporter for the Daily Telegraph, including his personal relationship with Frank Packer, pp. 157-160.
17 The ‘male gaze’ was first theorised in respect of psychoanalysis and cinema by Laura Mulvey in ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, Screen, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6–18. Mulvey understands the cinematic ‘male gaze’ as founded in ‘a world ordered by sexual imbalance’, in which ‘pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connot e-to-be-looked-at-ness’ (p. 10). Such a statement grounds Mulvey’s ‘male gaze’ theory broadly in patriarchal culture, and validates its application to other cultural expressions, especially to those, such as women’s magazines, whose appeal is both visual and discursive.
benevolence and intelligence, but above all by assuming the invulnerability, of successful and/or glamorous businessmen, salesmen, actors, academics and medical men.

**Money Matters**

Patriarchy and the profit motive usually support each other in McKie’s *Women’s Weekly* writing, but when rare clashes occur, patriarchy loses out. His article, ‘A Woman and Her Clothes’ encourages spending both by housewives (swayed by the Feminine Mystique) and by working women (driven by the Beauty Myth). McKie’s fictionalised unheroic persona emerges in such statements as, ‘As the survey progressed I became concerned, then alarmed at the thought of the massed husbands who would soon be waiting for me round corners with hatchets.’

This is because his findings favour the women’s urge to spend. He quotes the weekly budgets of female interviewees, which expose the wives’ poverty and the high proportion of their wages that unmarried factory and office girls spend on clothes. The only interviewee censured is the ‘young professional woman’ who spends £8 a week and is hoping to ‘marry money’. Briefly McKie sides openly with the husbands by commenting: ‘I assured her it was the only hope she had’, a sneer that transfers to Australia Friedan’s recognition of ‘a strange paradox that as all professions are finally open to women in America, “career woman” has become a dirty word’.

McKie’s article otherwise presents women’s financial dependence on men as an incontrovertible necessity, in support of Western women’s discursively manufactured return to domesticity in the decades that followed World War II. ‘A Woman and Her Clothes’ encourages women, as leading supporters of capitalist growth, to spend more and more on clothes, jewellery, beauty treatments and cosmetics. It thus embeds the *Weekly’s* economically indispensable female readers in their massed identity as consumers, whatever their individual aspirations might be. Simultaneously it pressures men as earners to supply more and more money for their dependent women to spend. Overall, the article suggests that women’s centrality as consumers did not always liberate them from the patriarchal control that in this era was synonymous with marriage.

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19 ‘Why is it never said that the really crucial function, the really important role that women serve as housewives is to buy more things for the house?’ *The Feminine Mystique*, p. 243; ‘When the restless, isolated, bored, and insecure housewife fled the Feminine Mystique for the workplace, advertisers faced the loss of their primary consumer….Somehow, somewhere, someone must have figured out that they will buy more things if they are kept in the self-hating, ever-failing, hungry, and sexually insecure state of being aspiring “beauties”’. *The Beauty Myth*, p. 66.


21 *The Feminine Mystique*, p. 66.

22 Virginia Woolf had brilliantly exposed this as a fiction thirty years earlier in *A Room of One’s Own*.
Readers seem to have reacted to ‘A Woman and Her Clothes’ as criticism of extravagant female spending, and the Weekly seized the opportunity for promoting controversy, in addition to clothes-buying by both sexes. Three months later, Cynthia Strachan, Staff Reporter, wrote a reply, ‘How Much Do MEN spend on Their Clothes?’: ‘If Australian men were to total the average amount they spent on clothes each year, most would reach for the headache pills and adopt a much more benevolent attitude towards the “extravagance” of women.’ Strachan’s response suggests that the Women’s Weekly encouraged dialogue, provided that it did not challenge the economic norms of gender relationships.

### The Humble Male Reporter

McKie’s fictional writing identity in the Women’s Weekly achieves an illusory reversal in the hierarchised gender binaries first theorised in 1975 by Hélène Cixous, when he extracts humour from straying as a naïve male into female territory. His winning boyish posture directed to female readers’ protective instincts is obvious in the photo accompanying ‘Reporter at Large at a Hat Parade’, an article that subliminally invites women to covet if not buy the expensive fashions featured at Henriette Lamotte’s Sydney salon. A tall model and well-dressed female attendees dominate the foreground, while perspective draws the viewer’s eye to a small-boy upward-looking image of the reporter, the lowest human in the photo. This is one of several photos in which McKie appears in the Weekly as an innocent, Chaplinesque figure, a blundering comic waif in a world of potent, eye-filling women. In ‘It’s No Cop Being Santa’, he subordinates himself, while paradoxically enthroned as one of Western patriarchy’s formative authority figures, to both mothers and their children.

McKie’s articles further fictionalise male dependency and subordination when he reveals that some of the women he writes about attract him sexually—‘every time the lovely June Massey appeared I liked every hat she wore’; ‘That dark-haired Mum in blue spots, for instance, who made my cap pompom bob when I smiled benevolently at her through my ziff’. ‘Ziff’ is a now little-used Australian

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word for ‘beard’, and the sentence’s sexual innuendos must be intentional. Similarly, photos for ‘Short Skirts Says Paris, So Legs are Back and Men Are Glad of It’ depict two elderly gentlemen, seated low, staring closely at a young model’s legs, an example of what Mulvey was later to label ‘fetishistic scopophilia’.

McKie joins the captivated, suppliant gazers via his by-line as ‘a leg man from a long line of kilted leg men’. The endorsement of female sexual power in McKie’s articles is an appealing hallucination that conceals actual masculine dominance as well as the emotional distance between the vocal men and the silent women portrayed.

‘Gazing’ Rights

Supported by their photos, the articles just discussed tread a tightrope between on one side a comic and morale-boosting but illusory male submissiveness, and on the other McKie’s presumption as a male reporter of unlimited rights of gazing and judging, ‘subjecting [other people] to a controlling and curious gaze’. He categorises the 150 attendees at the hat parade as either naïve and suggestible (and sad), or calculating and greedy (and tense): ‘They reminded me of rock lizards in the sun—tense, still, with only their eyes incredibly alive’. The misogyny expressed through animal analogies in McKie’s descriptions is moderated by his respect for two older women who escaped from the show’s commercial and gendered imperatives by ‘gossiping’—‘There was a subtle, elusive charm in the way they put glamour in its place’. By hinting at a dissident friendship, this comment fleetingly challenges the article’s premise, otherwise maintained throughout and pinpointed by Wolf as a foundation of the Beauty Myth, that relationships among women are essentially competitive.

Interviewing ‘Gazers’

The men interviewed by McKie in the Women’s Weekly are a seemingly ad hoc collection, all of whom readily consent to stating their opinions about women. While McKie does not always openly concur, he takes for granted and in fact bases these articles on gazing and judging as a masculine prerogative. Many of the interviewees’ responses conceal misogyny and assumptions of male supremacy under a façade of benevolence.

30 The age difference between the elderly voyeurs and their object presages the ‘pervasive’ workplace paradigm of the 1980s that Wolf, p. 34, exemplified by a ‘mature’ and ‘powerful’ TV anchor man paired with ‘a nubile heavily made-up female junior’ who typically feels ‘visible but insecure’.
31 ‘It is my thesis that the core of the problem for women today is not sexual but a problem of identity—a stunting or evasion of growth that is perpetuated by the feminine mystique’. The Feminine Mystique, pp. 77; compare The Beauty Myth, pp. 13 and 34.
33 ‘Competition among women has been made part of the myth so that women will be divided from one another’, The Beauty Myth, p. 14.
In describing Antoine of Paris, ‘the world’s most celebrated hairdresser for five decades’, McKie emphasises his interviewee’s tan face cream and pencilled eyebrows, thereby punishing in advance any implied escape from binary gendering. The article’s title nevertheless highlights Antoine’s metaphors: ‘Women, They’re Tigers, They’re Flowers—AND THEY EAT TOO MUCH’, and quotes his hostile analogy for women’s hidden power:

You have, of course, heard of the Chinese torture when they dropped water drop by drop on a victim until he went mad. Women are like that, like those little drops of water which in themselves are small and weak but collectively heavy and powerful. Women dominate the world because they are so much stronger than men…34

An article entitled ‘The Subject Was Women’,35 again relies on men’s phallocentric rights as gazers and judges. In this article McKie interviews a group of youngish Pan-American Airways salesmen visiting Sydney from Rome, Paris, New York, Chicago, London and Frankfurt. As McKie reports them, the salesmen’s opinions are a compendium of 1950s feminine gender-typing: ‘a woman must be all woman’; ‘but she must be intelligent—it was the Englishman who added “not too intelligent please”’; ‘a woman’s worst characteristic?’—‘wanting to wear the pants’, ‘stubbornness’, ‘jealousy’. ‘The Italian listened and bent forward. You have all failed. It is chatter, chatter, chatter’. The interviewees’ untroubled assumption of authority—‘The real decision is still the man’s, because he still controls the family’s money’—affirms economically-based patriarchy across Western nations.

**Tycoons**

Nevertheless, the most provocative of McKie’s interviews are with industrial tycoons whose wealth placed them on a viewing and speaking platform that capitalism and patriarchy conspired to place beyond challenge. These interviewees frequently shield contempt for women behind a facade of chivalry. For example, McKie’s article on Robert Guggenheim, a member of the wealthy New York family, and Robert Hutchings, a Bristol shoe magnate, is sub-headed: ‘Both are over 70, and both like horses and women’: Robert Guggenheim: ‘If you have a perceptive eye, and I have, one of the things that gives me great pleasure—and it’s free—is just looking at a well-dressed woman’. ‘Next to a beautiful woman’, [Robert Hutchings] told me, ‘the most beautiful things in life are a racehorse and a perfectly made pair of women’s shoes’.36

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Adopting an appearance of erudition and paternal concern, Sir Frank Hooper, the British managing director of Schweppes, designated by McKie ‘a big, shambling, wise old sophisticate’, who claims ‘a life-long interest in all cultural subjects’, contributes further to gender fictions by misrepresenting one of Virginia Woolf’s psycho-sociological insights as advocacy for women’s subjection:

The chief function of women is to see their menfolk twice life-size and to tell them, at least once a day, that they are twice as good as they really are. Sir Frederic Hooper’s double chin shook like a new blancmange when he added: I think Virginia Woolf said that—and I agree entirely.

Activating the man/Logos, woman/Pathos binary later theorised by Cixous, Sir Frank endorses some older women’s ‘immense enthusiasm often based on wide knowledge’ for the arts, but warns ‘the young man’ against relying on a woman’s ‘intuitive’ judgments. He alleges that he and his ‘old friend’ H. G. Wells agreed ‘on many points’, such as:

Great women writers are rare, and great women painters and composers don’t exist. The reason is obvious. Their creative ability is strictly limited. Their function is different. They are creative in another way.

He concludes by mixing the Beauty Myth with flattery in a way that limits options for women of the future: ‘It would be a terrible day if they ever became naturally creative, for then they would lose their greatest asset—their charm and beauty as women’.

Benefactors of Humanity

Others of McKie’s interviews further fictionalise and soften patriarchy’s facade by inviting admiration for men whose presumed devotion to humane ideals has brought professional success. Among these are Professor Henry Kessler, orthopaedic surgeon and founder of the Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation; and Dr

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38 With irony and subdued anger, Woolf in fact wrote: ‘Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Probably without that power the earth would still be swamp and jungle….Supermen and Fingers of Destiny would never have existed….Whatever may be their use in civilised societies, mirrors are essential to all violent and heroic action. That is why Napoleon and Mussolini both insist so emphatically upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge….The looking-glass vision is of supreme importance because it charges the vitality; it stimulates the nervous system. Take it away and man may die, like the drug fiend deprived of his cocaine’ (A Room of One’s Own, pp. 46-47).


Owen Wangensteen, Professor of Surgery and inventor of the Wangensteen suction apparatus, estimated to have saved millions of lives: ‘There is a softness, a gentleness about him which reminds you of the old family doctor when you were a sick kid’.41

Interviewing Women

McKie interviews accomplished women only half as often as he interviews men. Although superficially surprising in view of the Women’s Weekly’s professed readership, this ratio validates Friedan’s observation, quoted above, of men’s control of female media, as well as the gendered discourse that encourages men to be active talkers and women passive listeners. McKie’s female interviewees are not asked for, and do not offer, opinions about men. Instead he questions them about women in an orientation that supports yet another insight of A Room of One’s Own: that in a patriarchy women are subjected to unequal scrutiny and analysis.42 Motivated as it may be by women’s centrality to consumerism, the Women’s Weekly’s apparently flattering focus on women as a separate group is the key fiction that obscures the pervasiveness within its pages of both the Feminine Mystique and the Beauty Myth. McKie’s female interviewees express dissident priorities through or over the obstacles posed by the Mystique and the Myth with varying success.

Approved Professions

Women committed to maternal or pseudo-maternal professions are given more scope, and even trespass metaphorically into masculine domains. When McKie blunders in his usual guise as innocent observer into the maternity ward of King George V Hospital, the male clinical superintendent is his chief informant, but the sister-in-charge momentarily takes on the status of the heroes that McKie admires in his war writings: ‘Watching her, as she issued orders to her nurses, talked on the phone, talked to doctors, checked medical charts and records, was like watching a captain on his bridge in action’.43 He similarly commends Miss Adeline Sturgess and Miss Ruth Robbins, ‘most pleasant, tolerant, experienced women’, who have enjoyed long careers as infant school teachers, and whose heroic advocacy for children’s wellbeing he allows to speak for itself. 44

42 ‘Have you any notion of how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many are written by men?’ (A Room of One’s Own, p. 33) ‘...Why are women, judging from this [British Museum] catalogue so much more interesting to men than men are to women?’ (p. 35)....’Here I drew a breath and added, indeed, in the margin, Why does Samuel Butler say, “Wise men never say what they think about women”? Wise men never say anything else apparently’ (p. 37).
Dealing with Dissidence

Other articles nevertheless remind potential rebels of correct feminine concerns under the Beauty Myth:

If Mrs. Irene Montlake had been born a century ago she would probably have fought Indians or discovered an archipelago, or crossed Siberia on a yak. She’s that sort of English woman—with the energy of a reactor—but she would have always managed, under the most trying circumstances, to look charming.25

Industrialist Anna Zwerin, since her husband’s death president of Capitol Steel Corporation, was strong enough to get into print her dissenting ideas about management (profit-sharing for employees), married women working (they should), and the Soviet Union (since Stalin’s death ‘a new liberal wind is blowing through the country’):

Far too many women passively reflect their husbands’ lives and ideas. They should develop their own personalities through special interests and learn to think and express their own opinions….A man respects a wife with interests and opinions of her own. Children respect a mother who is more than a household parrot.46

Superwoman Leonie Kramer

Closer to home, McKie’s interview with Mrs. Leonie Kramer, lecturer at the University of New South Wales and panellist on the A.B.C. radio show ‘The Critics’, likewise censures from a privileged position women who succumb to domesticity. Following doctoral studies at Oxford, travels in Europe, a visit to her husband’s family in Cape Town, and lecturing from 1953 to 1956 at Canberra University College,47 Mrs. Kramer finds the segregation of men from women at Australian parties ‘intensely interesting, most peculiar, and thoroughly exasperating’. She blames this ‘social segregation’ entirely on the women:

It is time they became women of the 20th century, cultivated some reasonably intelligent interest in life around them, in problems of the day; time they read more, argued more, and got away from the

endless chatter about babies, shopping, clothes, and gossip.48

As another example of gender stereotyping resulting from the Women’s Weekly’s editorial ‘reflection of public taste’, this complaint reiterates the Pan-Am Italian’s condemnation of women’s ‘chatter, chatter, chatter’. Mrs. Kramer likewise ‘gets impatient’ with women who ‘make slaves of themselves instead of organising their time’: ‘The tired woman is often the bored woman...who has no interests away from her broom, her duster, and her stove’. We can understand these remarks as a well-intentioned call for housewives to discipline themselves in order to escape from what Friedan was on the point of exposing as the Feminine Mystique.49 On the other hand, the model that Kramer proposed may have functioned further to lower by comparison the self-esteem and confidence of readers whom a pervasive ideology had left with few options other than to submit to the housewife role.50

By setting up Leonie Kramer as an ideal, McKie’s article promotes the fiction that women have the freedom, opportunity and ability to combine the feminine accomplishments of maternity, housework and sexual attractiveness with a career, if only they have the will. How wrong you would be, he writes, pre-empting any repetition of the ‘too intelligent’ fault raised by the Pan Am Englishman, if you thought of a woman of Mrs. Kramer’s academic accomplishments as a bluestocking—

for she is a mother of two, expert housewife and cook, interested in clothes, charming to look at, delightful to talk to, completely feminine....And as a womanly woman, with brown swept-up hair, lovely sea-blue eyes, and a quick enchanting smile, she has some firm opinions...51

As reported by McKie, Leonie Kramer’s contempt for women stranded in domesticity aligns her with the husbands conversing together at the opposite end of the barbeque. This can be understood as an essential strategy for any Australian woman in this decade who sought individual fulfilment through education and a career. The Kramer model resonates with another of Betty Friedan’s observations about America: ‘The key to the trap is, of course, education. The feminine mystique has made higher education for women seem suspect, unnecessary and even

49 Indeed, Leonie Kramer’s severity towards submissive housewives may reflect a struggle of her own to flee from the era’s all-absorbing feminine role. She records that after living briefly in Sydney for the first time as a full-time mother, she realised that ‘I was not meant to be totally immersed in domesticity’ (Broomstick, p. 107). On the other hand, the advantages accruing to her family origins, natural gifts, education, and marriage to a distinguished doctor and medical researcher were exceptional among 1950s Australian women.
50 See The Feminine Mystique, pp. 33-37.
dangerous.' Accordingly, Mrs. Kramer’s plans for her future eclipse academic ambition under the satisfactions of work in the home. Given the stellar if controversial career that was to follow, more than a touch of irony accompanies some claims, even though Leonie Kramer’s reminiscences show that her love of cooking was genuine:

‘I have always loved teaching and lecturing,’ she says, ‘but with husband, children and home, I have no ambition to aim at a professorship, to make a full-time career of it. I’d much prefer to concentrate on cooking, for one of the really worthwhile things in life is to be a good cook…I’ve just made a casserole.’

As a lover of good casseroles himself, McKie records the recipe for his readers to try.

Leonie Kramer in fact practised cooking skills in a domestic science course run by Melbourne University’s Janet Clarke Hall, ‘Because a benefactor had left a sum of money to instruct ‘freshers’ in the domestic arts, so that they should not emerge from the university as well-educated but single-minded blue-stockings’. The wife of the Governor of Victoria presented students who completed the course with a Diploma in Domestic Economy. Such a process bespeaks a society bent on demonstrating that however educated women in the post-war economy might become, ‘kitchens were once again the center of women’s lives’. Accordingly, in speaking to McKie, Leonie Kramer blurs her male-identified persona as an accomplished young woman with the pleasure that she takes as a wife and mother in conforming to the Feminine Mystique. The self as projected keeps both images simultaneously in play. In sum, the interview displays the interviewee’s political acumen and tact, while also inviting women readers to take steps to broaden their experience.

Rehabilitating Sadie Orr

On 16 March 1956, the University of Tasmania sacked Sydney Orr from the Chair of Philosophy for allegedly seducing an undergraduate, Suzanne Kemp. McKie’s 10-hour exclusive interview with Mrs. Sadie Orr in the Orrs’ home again testifies to his importance as a conservative interpreter of events that defined 1950s

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52 *The Feminine Mystique*, p. 431.
57 *The Feminine Mystique*, p. 4. Friedan notes that the house of a friend who gave up writing to become a full-time housewife ‘was almost literally one big kitchen’ (p. 293).
As in his reporting of the Petrov Royal Commission, McKie approaches a complicated political issue obliquely through the woman, at a point when outcomes had been decided, and the only task remaining was to guide the public’s response.

The article begins by proclaiming: ‘This is Mrs. Orr’s story—a story of steadfast faith in her husband’. McKie describes the Orrs’ ‘new modern brick and glass home…in Hobart’s best suburb’, and invites sympathy for Mrs. Orr, who since her husband’s sacking cannot afford feminine luxuries like hair-dressing and a new lipstick. McKie’s characterisation of Sadie Orr and description of her sparse but orderly household support her claim that she has maintained the proprieties of disciplining, clothing and feeding her three children. She denies that sexual relations between her husband and Suzanne Kemp took place in her home, and that she herself, as Kemp had claimed, had made supper ‘after they had returned from the bedroom’. She does, however, admit that ten years earlier the Orrs maintained a ménage à trois with ‘Miss A’, and that the latter had given birth to Orr’s child. She refers gratefully to support that the family has received from loyal friends, and from the Catholic, Methodist and Presbyterian churches.

McKie’s article abets Sadie Orr’s anxious attempt to rebuild an image of family respectability and conformity to the Feminine Mystique. Its ‘project’, to apply Pierre Macherey’s term, is to occlude and extinguish the challenge to gendered and sexual norms posed by the rebellious extra-marital features of the Orr case. In other words, the article maintains the fictionalising of women’s roles and choices perpetrated by McKie’s Women’s Weekly writing as a whole.

‘Educating’ the Weekly’s Readers

McKie writes more broadly on topics that are less obviously burdened with gender issues. Leading exponents of twentieth-century culture are among his interviewees. Articles on painting, heritage and buildings, including the Opera Australia.

House, display his personal responsiveness to architecture and the visual arts, while the eye-catching titles announcing landmark events like Canberra’s thirtieth anniversary, and advances in medicine and space science are based on his solid if basic research. A smaller group of McKie’s articles focuses on the lives of immigrants, and on sport, theatre history, and movies. Writing as an outsider, McKie considers Australian scholarship in interviews with Alec Chisholm, editor of the Australian Encyclopaedia, and Professor A. G. Mitchell of Sydney University on

64 McKie supports the efforts of the newly-formed National Trust to save ‘the gracious St Malo’ and three others of Hunter’s Hill’s historic buildings, about to be destroyed ‘in one swipe in the name of progress’ to accommodate an expressway, in an act of ‘official vandalism’ (‘The Threat to St Malo’, AWW, 7 October 1959, p. 10, Available from Trove http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/445571417, accessed 6 February 2015).


Australian pronunciation.73

However, Friedan’s Chapter, ‘A New Life Plan for Women’, makes a crucial distinction between women’s ‘amateur’ study for ‘self-enrichment’ on the one hand, and education ‘only in regular colleges and universities’, undertaken for ‘serious’ use in creative or professional work, in order ‘to fulfil an ambition of [a woman’s] own, long buried or brand new, to work at top capacity, to have a sense of achievement’. Friedan advocates such fulfilment as the solution to the ‘problem that has no name’ raised in her first chapter.74

McKie’s educative articles belong in Friedan’s first, dilettante category. They function additionally to obscure the difference between the two categories, and even the existence of the ‘serious’ category. Like most of McKie’s *Women’s Weekly* writing, these contributions offer a fantasy gratification only, and one that meshed with McKie’s aspirations as a novelist. By distracting the attention of women readers from political and economic issues of the day, they silently promoted relegation of these readers to a private sphere adorned by ‘culture’. At the same time, they replicated, through McKie’s authoritative commentaries, patriarchy’s control over this same sphere.

**Literary Misogyny**

Unexpectedly, in view of the fiction-writing ambitions that McKie had cherished since schooldays, and which, by the late 1950s, he had partially fulfilled through journalism and his books on travel and war, only four of his *Women’s Weekly* articles deal with literary subjects.75 This is despite the *Weekly’s* promotion in this period of ‘good reading’ and ‘great writers’, for example through Dorothy Drain’s column, ‘It Seems to Me’.76 McKie seems not to have wanted to read, to write, or to write about, the female fiction that was a major attraction for the *Weekly’s* readers. The most revealing of McKie’s few literary commentaries introduces Henry Lawson’s story, ‘Grandfather’s Courtship’, republished in the same *Weekly* issue.77

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74 *The Feminine Mystique*, pp. 430-436.
The article attacks Lawson’s mother Louisa as a ‘dominating suffragette’, and denigrates Henry as being tainted, like his mother, with ‘mysticism’. McKie insists that Lawson’s depiction of women characters is superficial and sentimental, but agrees with him that ‘woman’s brutality, which surpasses the brutality of men’ is balanced, on occasion, by ‘her mighty self-sacrificing sympathy and compassion’. Despite this attempt to gain equilibrium, comments in ‘Legacy of Lawson’ suggest that misogyny is a driving force in all of McKie’s Women’s Weekly writing.

Conclusions

If Ronald McKie’s 100 articles are a representative sample, they support the conclusion that in the 1950s patriarchy controlled Australian women’s magazines, just as, according to Betty Friedan, it controlled similar magazines in America. McKie’s articles use fictionalising techniques which he had perfected as a journalist, military historian, travel writer and aspiring novelist to reinforce a gendered norm for women readers. These techniques include McKie’s adoption of a false persona as a naïve harmless inquirer, sexually subject to women in a women’s world of wealth, glamour and fashion; the transference of masculine hero status to women employed as nurturers, such as hospital matrons and kindergarten teachers; humour, and an overall cheerfulness of tone. Under the cover of such literary-fictional devices, McKie’s Women’s Weekly contributions promote women’s confinement under the Feminine Mystique to suburban homes as consumers, and prioritise their roles under the Beauty Myth as objects of gaze and judgment. Educative articles and interviews on painting, medicine, science, heritage and architecture offer women readers a false assurance of intellectual challenge and growth, but in fact function to reconcile women to life under the Feminine Mystique. By encouraging dilettantism, these articles deflect attention from the options of vocational education and fulfilment through paid work. In sum, the fictionalising strategies of McKie’s contributions are rightly to be regarded as ‘opiates’ in the Marxist sense.

McKie’s interviews with men and attack on Louisa Lawson suggest that misogyny lurks beneath the brightly polished, cheerful surface of his Women’s Weekly writing. McKie’s interviews with women collude with ideology to stifle, distort or marginalise female dissent, while blaming housewives themselves for any feelings of boredom or unfulfilled potential.

Consequently, this survey supports the contention that, when first published and read, McKie’s Women’s Weekly writing functioned simultaneously to promote and disguise patriarchal and capitalist imperatives, the rigid outlines of which can now be discerned through the blanketing cosiness of the era. Analysis has exemplified the seamlessness, in Australia as in other Western nations, of late 1950s gender ideology, which second-wave feminism, led by Friedan, Mulvey, Cixous, Wolf and others, was to explode in the decades that followed. While the degree to which the renewed feminist movement after the 1950s succeeded in procuring justice and freedom for women is still not clear, credit must be given to those like Friedan who first delineated, and proposed solutions for, ‘the problem that has no name’.