L I M I N A

Politics, Identity, History: An Interview with Marilyn Lake

Professor Marilyn Lake holds a Personal Chair in the School of History at La Trobe University, where she was appointed founding Director of Women's Studies in 1988. She has written extensively on aspects of Australian history, especially women's history, and is working on a history of feminist thought in Australia. In 1997, Professor Lake delivered the Fred Alexander lecture at the University of Western Australia. While there, she spoke to Judy Skene.

Can I begin by asking what attracted you to the discipline of history? Was it always your intention to become an historian?

It's such a long time ago for me to remember. I did history and English literature at school and I took those on into university and although English was my major subject and I was intending to do Honours in English I nevertheless, almost despite myself, kept doing better at history and liking history, so I went on to do Honours and a Masters degree and a PhD in fairly quick succession. I suppose that I loved the sense of constructing an argument, of putting together the evidence to work up a particular meaning. It appealed to me, that sense of placing meaning on the disorder of the past.

I'd like to talk about your publications. You've dealt with a range of subjects - women's history, labour history, citizenship and war, to name a few. Is there a common theme that you would identify in your work?

I have indeed covered a broad range of subjects in Australian history, which I am pleased about. I like to have a grasp of the interrelated areas of Australian history. I've written about land settlement, labour history and a lot on the wars, and on women's history and sexuality, on nationalism and feminism, yes. In terms of the themes that might characterise these writings,

I suppose in the beginning, I was quite drawn to the history of conflict and that was evident in the political history being written in the early 1970s. My first book, which was my Masters thesis, was called *A Divided Society*. In the soldier settlement book, I was interested in the relationship between the experience of the people on the land and the politics of anger that came out of that. And I was interested in the political relations between men and women. Certainly, one of the things that ties the soldier settlement project together is politics, different versions of politics. I move between more conventional public politics to domestic politics and I like to see the relations between those things. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* provided the theoretical framework. I was also very interested by then in language.

There is the issue of contested histories there too, isn't there?

Yes, that's right. Part of the convention of writing history is coming up with a new interpretation, writing against the old interpretations. In a way, as my history writing went on, I was less interested in knocking down old accounts than in constructing new ones. I became interested in looking at things in new ways or from a new angle. History is always written in the context of addressing accounts that are already there.

In your recent Fred Alexander lecture at the University of Western Australia, you talked about history as a powerful ideological weapon and defended what has been labelled 'the black armband view of history' that addresses racism, sexism, imperialism... How important do you think it is, at this particular time in Australia's history, for historians to have a public role in promoting their construction of history?

I think historians are implicated in contemporary politics, particularly Australian historians, whether they like it or not. There is quite a direct relationship between political issues of the day and the sort of history we write. That may mean writing women's history in order to make a point about women having a history: that women felt and spoke things in the past and these things shaped the way our nation became, and that has political import for the status of women today. What interests me is that the construction of nations always involves the constructions of histories, so that our understanding of what Australia is, where it has come from, what it stands for - or, what the United States is, or what France is - always has an historical dimension. As historians, we are constructing a past about that country. I'm interested in the way that history as a discipline has served nationalism. That the function of history was to write the history of the nation, and the existence of the nation created new sorts of histories. Australian history thus changed as it moved from colonial times to becoming a nationalist version that celebrates a particular view of Australia. Thus do politics and history go hand in hand. I would encourage people to be conscious of what they are doing, for many men are not.

Richard White and Penny Russell claim, in the introduction to a recent collection Memories and Dreams: Reflections on 20th Century Australia, that academic historians have become more uncertain about their role and that the nation's narratives are being produced by the press, politicians and polemicists. Do you agree?

Yes, well they might be referring to the fact that new theoretical developments in the Humanities pull the rug out from beneath the certainties. What we might label postmodernist approaches make us more hesitant to claim to know the truth about what happened, whereas less reflective people, the press or politicians, might rush in more readily to say, 'this is what happened'. As we were saying before though, there are a lot of historians who are engaging in the debate about our past so I think the two processes are occurring at the same time. For my part, I don't find any conflict there because I think we say and write things strategically. That is, you might engage in a particular theoretical debate within the university but that might be unsuitable for speaking in the press. One's utterances are always strategic. All those things about postmodern uncertainties and who can write for whom, and what we can know - all those epistemological issues - are certainly influential in Australian historical discourse but on the other hand, as I said, a lot of historians are also willing to write in newspapers and speak on radio for a different sort of audience.

Partly it comes back to the realisation, as you were saying the other day during the Fred Alexander lecture, that histories are partial and always more complicated than we can easily state, and it is getting that view across to the broader public that is difficult.

That's absolutely right. There is a tension between our politics and our knowledge, that it is extremely complex. For example, I was talking to someone about the Harvester judgement of 1907 in Australia, which on the one hand used to be hailed, and quite rightly, as an enormously progressive decision. It said that wages had to be based on needs, a family's needs, and that profits should not be determinant of wages; that Australia was an ethical state and companies did not deserve to be in business if they were not going to pay wages on a proper basis. Now that was very progressive welfare state stuff but on the other hand, we all know that that same judgement defined women as dependents and thus not deserving of a living wage. Only men were. So it was subject to trenchant feminist critique. And also, we know that Aboriginal workers were not given adult wages, often no wages at all; that really, this was a decision that privileged white men. All of those things are true about it: there is not just one truth about it. There are conflicting implications, on the one hand progressive and on the other, reactionary. That brings us back to the necessity of being strategic. For the broader public, you have to be careful in what you are saying, all the while trying to get the message across that the historical process is complicated. It is also the difference between intellectual work and politics. Politics likes simplicities and binary oppositions and it likes 'is it this or is it that?', whereas good history is always about the ambiguities of interacting forces, the fact that we are both victims and agents at the same time, that we are subjects and subjected. Intellectual ideas are complex and political positions, often to be successful, need to reduce arguments to simple binary oppositions.

Yes, I agree. In your contribution to the Richard White/Penny Russell collection, 'Female Desires: The Meaning of World War II', you discuss the competing constructions of femininity within Australian society during the war and the postwar period and you emphasise the significance of age in determining women's attitudes to sexuality. Reading your article, I was reminded of Helen Garner's comments in The First Stone about differences in attitude and about what is important between older feminists and younger women today. I wondered whether you had made any similar connections and whether your research had led you to draw any conclusions about generational gaps in feminism in Australia today?

Just the other day I was reading Dawn, the journal of the Women's Service Guild in the Battye Library, and there was a reference to the generation gap yet again; there are constant statements by every generation of feminists that we have to get more young women involved. They are saying that now in Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL), trying to remobilise feminist politics again in the 1990s. It has been said by every generation of feminists that young women generally are not interested in feminism. That interests me. There are different reasons for this. One is to do with sexuality and sexual identity. Young women are often interested in exploring aspects of their sexual, rather than their political, identity. In the 1970s, the political interests of feminism and young women's interest in their sexual identities coincided in Women's Liberation. That made the 1970s quite a rare historical moment. Helen Garner's comments and book are slightly different, interestingly, because she is positioning herself as a libertarian who was a feminist in the 1970s, and talking about a new puritanical type of feminism exhibited by young women. She is condemning young women for being the wrong kind of feminists. That, in some ways, cuts across the common understandings, because we are often told by American young women that older feminists are puritanical and repressive and conservative in their knowledge of sex. So there are some contradictions here. It is fairly unusual for an older feminist to accuse women in their early twenties of being puritans. It's usually the other way around, that women in their twenties are seen and dismissed as hedonists. The only general point to make is that feminism, like femininity, will always be re-inventing itself. There are always bound to be tensions between different cohorts of women. There will not be an easy continuity. Every generation will have different priorities and different terms of reference.

Your reference to American women reminds me that in another essay, 'The Inviolable Woman: Feminist Conceptions of Citizenship in Australia, 1900-1940', you discuss the activities of post-suffrage feminist groups in Australia and you make the point that the extent of this activity contradicts the United States-derived idea of two waves of feminist activity, punctuated by a long lull. Do you think that feminist historians in Australia need to take more account of the uniqueness of the Australian experience in applying theoretical perspectives to their work?

Well it certainly suggests that we should be very careful about taking explanatory models from another country and just saying, 'this is the explanation, now let's fit our material in'. That story about the 'two waves' is a very popular explanation and has been very influential. It just so happens that it obscured for so long the most active phase of feminism in the last hundred years in Australia and the most active, self-consciously feminist campaigns waged by numerous organisations in the 1920s, 30s, 40s. There was a women's charter conference in 1943 and it was attended by representatives of about ninety-five women's organisations. It was astonishing. That also raises a lot of historical questions about the preconditions for activism. One of the preconditions seemed to be not engaging in paid work. In other words, these women had the time. They were amateur politicians or full-time citizens. They took their citizenship seriously. Never has a group of people taken their citizenship so seriously as these women.

Thinking about citizenship in Australia, how successful do you think historians such as yourself have been in promoting the concept of a revitalised citizenship that includes women?

Not very! What I like to do really is to link up earlier demands of the Women's Movement, or critiques of women's position in society, with a contemporary interest in the construction of citizenship. I am interested in thinking about whether the category of citizen can indeed be used to further women's interests. One of the particular issues that interests me is women's capacity for self-defence or lack of it. The way that women are still very much positioned as the protected sex. I think that one of the implications of citizenship is that (though it is not well protected!) the ideal citizen, the white man, is self-defending, self-protecting and self-determining. We need therefore to think about the preconditions which will enable women to be self-determining and self-defending. I see political possibilities in the category of citizenship. It is a discourse that can be used for reformist politics. Now that communism has failed and there is no socialist movement and no credible opposition on the left or around class politics, the category of citizen can become quite useful as a way to critique market models of society. In fact they do not even talk about society, they talk about the economy in which we have a commercial relationship with service providers. In Victoria, this is clear. So we need the language of citizenship to talk about an interdependent community, in order to talk about reciprocal rights and the obligations of the state. All those things have a radical potential and we can invoke the category of citizen to pursue an emancipatory politics.

Radical democrats would say that the liberal concept of citizenship is a very narrow one, economically defined, and they would like to invest it with much more sense of possibility and participation.

Yes, that's right. Citizenship can be used for many purposes and defined in many ways. I think it thus has possibilities for numerous people to argue in terms of it: citizenship can legitimate their demands. I remember, for example, at the time of the Kew Cottages fire in Melbourne, when the children were burnt and there was a discussion of neglect and the withdrawal of the state from providing basic services. Judy Brett, who writes a column in *The Age* - a wonderful column - said that her response as a citizen was to feel shame when she read about those events. I thought that was a good way of trying to get us all to think about our reciprocal obligations and our interdependence. We should not be just individual private citizens maximising our own pleasure, which seems to be the model of being that is favoured at the moment in the political arena.

A question now about criticisms of feminist historians by Aboriginal women. The criticism has been around for some time, that feminist historians in Australia have not recognised white women's complicity in the repression of Aboriginal society in the past or not acknowledged Aboriginal agency. How do you think feminist historians can take account of these criticisms in their writing?

It is a really interesting and complex issue. When these critiques, which as you say have been around for some time, first emerged, and they emerged not just out of women's experience here, but also in overseas post-colonial scholarship, from Britain and the United States and other places, they were enormously pertinent. It was true that women's history was, by and large, written by white women about white women and from white women's perspectives. A classic example in Australian historiography were the two books that came out about motherhood: Jill Matthews' Good and Mad Women and Kerreen Reiger's *The Disenchantment of the Home* in about the mid-80s. They both talked about the way the Australian state had promoted motherhood - that motherhood was practically compulsory. But it was so only for white women, because at the very same time, black children were being snatched away from their mothers. It was a good example of the way that the generalisations were based on the experiences of white women. The critiques were necessary and stimulating. One of my main responses was to go and think about 'whiteness' and the construction of whiteness and how whiteness was quite central to history. I was interested in the way the self-confidence of feminists in Australia in the late-nineteenth and earlytwentieth centuries could only be understood by seeing these women as the bearers of civilisation as they saw it. I have written guite a bit about whiteness as constitutive of identity and privilege. Particularly around the turn of the century, feminists were conscious of their race and their kin. I think Aboriginal critiques were very important and we have to keep in mind that whiteness means privilege, just as masculinity does.

Beyond that, there is the issue of who can write what and who can teach what. I teach general courses in Australian gender relations, which I have done for about ten years, and I always have quite a bit on the policy of taking the children away. When I first started teaching that, the general community were not aware of this history. The students were shocked about what they were learning about their country's past. It was, and is, important work to teach that. In terms of who can write what, for my own part, I think we have to proceed to write and teach about racism. One will always be criticised, but one must just accept that. We should be conscious of our own privilege and our own whiteness. Not only our own privilege today. but also the privilege of the subjects we are writing about. Whiteness was oppressive; that is the first thing. The second thing is, I think non-Aboriginal people should inform ourselves as much as we can, about Aboriginal society and read as much as we can of what Aboriginal people themselves write. I endeavour to do that. I often think about this issue in terms of what I would expect of men. What would I expect of men, vis-a-vis women and feminist history? One thing I expect is for them to actually do the hard work of reading. To inform themselves and not think they can get away with getting some woman to do it. You know that sort of lazy response? I think that is a useful way to think about this. We all have a responsibility to inform ourselves as much as possible. We have to be very careful: one cannot speak for other people but that is no excuse for not doing anything. Chilla Bulbeck, who is at Griffith University, wrote a piece in Meanjin a few years ago about this very issue and her conclusion, I basically share. That you have to keep on engaging with those issues knowing all the time that you will be criticised. It's a course for masochists! That is the sort of moral imperative that might not be very attractive to some. There is one more thing. I think we also have a responsibility as historians - going back to that first thing about it all being complex - we have a responsibility to point out the complexities of past lives, societies, interactions. I'm a bit impatient with the polemical dismissals, with claims that white women or feminists have never done a single good thing in the past. One needs to keep complexity and ambiguity in mind. White women might be simultaneously complicit and resisting. One needs also to say, 'that person's position was actually quite substantially different from that person's'. As historians, we have a responsibility to the past, as well as to the present.

I thought that the example you mentioned during your Fred Alexander lecture, of Jessie Street, a white feminist, and Faith Bandon, an Aboriginal activist, cooperating in a form of coalition politics during the 1950s, was an interesting response in that that is one sort of strategy you can use.

Yes. I think the binary oppositions which politics often rely on, 'them and us', are often not effective as a politics. Interestingly, on this subject, I wrote a piece for *The Age* a few weeks ago on the history of feminist antiracism. The sub-editor entitled it 'Black and White Feminism'. I got a moving response from a woman who happened to be in Victoria, visiting from Arnhem Land, called Wadjabelina. She contacted me and we had lunch, and she suggested that we develop coalitions between women, that it was time for women to get together because issues like the welfare of children demanded united responses. The strategy of coalition makes a lot of sense in these despairing times.

Turning to some more general questions now, I wanted to ask you, what has been your experience of academic culture?

I suppose I have had guite a good experience of the academic culture. I enjoy university life, teaching and researching. I have had a fairly straightforward career, but diverted by having children. That taught me a lot about the incompatibility of career and caring for people. I still think that domestic responsibilities and careers are fundamentally incompatible, that the model of work and the workers is masculine, predicated on the assumption that a class of people called women will be at home looking after everything. In terms of the academic culture, I've been lucky. I've had a lot of support from people, both men and women. I was fortunate to be taught and guided by Kay Daniels, when I was in third and fourth year. She came to the University of Tasmania from Sussex at exactly the right time. This was the early 1970s. I think I was fortunate that my youth coincided with the burgeoning of women's history and the growth of a network of women scholars. I think a crucial shift occurred with the advent of the networks of women, from which I benefited. Women who were a bit older than me, eight to ten years older than me, had a quite different experience. They have a sense that they had absolutely no support, that no-one took their work seriously, that they were working in a vacuum. I did not have that. I was fortunate and the women who have come after me were fortunate to find a place in these networks of support.

What is your experience of the process of writing? Do you have a routine that works for you or is it more of a spontaneous creation?

I write fairly easily, thank goodness, and that is probably quite important for productivity. I've always written fairly spontaneously. There was a shift in my work though, from the more narrative style of *A Divided Society* into more analytical writing that was shaped by theoretical debate. That made me self-conscious about writing, and I planned articles in a slightly different way. I now suggest to students that they plan their argument, point by point. I am more likely now to do that sort of pre-planning. Once I would have just written it out and let the narrative flow shape the text, but now I am much more conscious about the steps in the argument. One of the

paradoxes of this is, given that I used to be Director of Women's Studies at La Trobe, that I was well apprenticed in masculine models of scholarship. I fear that I am very good at phallocentric argument, the very thing that feminist scholarship critiques, the linear mode of argument. I am often brought to think and talk about this with Women's Studies students, because students who are influenced by feminist critique want to try out different modes of writing and in my head, I am approving of that but I am still resistant to it. I am ashamed to say that the phallocentric, linear style suits me well.

Do you have an ideal working environment?

Yes, certainly. My work over the past twenty years has been in the context of children being around - my older daughter is nineteen - and I find it difficult to work when children are in the house. I think I was spoiled by having childcare centres. When they went there as little children, there was stillness and space, and I came to depend on it. I find it very difficult to write when other things are going on. I need to write at home, I can't write at the university. There are too many distractions, people coming in the door and phone calls. I need to have space and time. I like to write, if I can, in the mornings, because I feel freshest then.

Finally, I would just like to thank you for giving up your time to be interviewed and to close, to ask you about the major projects with which you are currently involved?

I am currently involved in several inter-related projects and the best way of describing them is to say they involve the history of women's political thought or the history of feminist thought in Australia. I have a contract to do a history of feminism in Australia and I feel bad about taking so long over it. That is broadly what I am working on, the history of feminism. Within that, there are particular projects. I am interested in the history of the relationship between 'women' and 'nation'; the incompatibility of 'women' and 'nation'. Women always seem an anomaly in the representations of a nation, and often feel alienated from representations of nations: I am interested in why that is the case and what should be done about it. I have just written a piece for the Australian Journal of History and Politics on this, about why, at the beginning of the Commonwealth, feminists identified strongly with the nation and were proud to be enfranchised. They identified strongly with the national project and the sort of nation they would build for ten or fifteen years, and then gradually they became very disillusioned. A huge gulf opened up between them and the nation so that by the 1970s Miriam Dixson, for example, wrote about Australian women being 'the doormats of the Western world'. I see this sense that women were living on the margins as an alienation of women from Australia as a nation. I'm interested in how that has come about and whether it is constitutional to nation building, to the very construction of

nations. There is also the point about men's deep investments in nations, their ownership of them, which is the other side of it. So that is what is currently preoccupying me.