

## **Her Stories: Women, Research and Recovery**

It is my pleasure to be here with you this morning, and to address a room of such accomplished and talented women from such a diverse range of fields, institutions and organisations.

I want to acknowledge the group of determined women who have brought us together this morning – the tireless women of the Canterbury Women's Club and in particular the tremendous trio of Lynette Hardie Wills, Karena Brown and Margaret Arnold who have driven this initiative.

It is also my pleasure to be able to step aside from being a politician for a fleeting moment and put my own researcher hat back on for a morning. I'm a woman. I'm a researcher by training and as a native Cantabrian who lived through our 10 000+ earthquakes I have a vested interest in this topic – Women, Research and Recovery.

This is not going to be a political speech where I talk about policies and politics in the conventional sense. This is for two reasons: Firstly, I am going to adhere to the strict rules set out by the founders of the Canterbury Women's Club in 1913 -- no politics or religion was to be discussed. It's also too early in the morning for that. Instead, this morning I want to take the opportunity to examine the role that women and their research has played in our history –and the role we as women researchers can play in our recovery.

### **What is research?**

First up – If you'll indulge me I want to set a basic frame and for us to think about think about what research is. I promise this won't turn into a lecture though.

The word research is derived from the Middle French "recherche", which means "to go about seeking",

Standard definitions go something like this: Research comprises creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of people, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications. It is used to establish or confirm facts, reaffirm the results of previous work, solve new or existing problems, support theorems, or develop new theories.

Usually research is understood to take many forms – but usually three main forms are cited– scientific research, research in the humanities and artistic research.

### **Research as gendered**

My experience as a researcher was as a historian and more specially New Zealand history. Gender and feminist theories and analyses underpinned my work. This means that I have to begin by thinking about the gendered nature of research itself.

For decades, feminist and gender scholars have examined the world through the lens of separate spheres – the public and the private spheres. Research as an undertaking has historically been understood to belong to the so-called “public” sphere - a space where individuals came together to freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through that discussion influence political action. This was the world of economy and politics– it was a world where men roamed free and women were largely excluded. Women’s proper space within the so-called “private sphere” of the home and the family.

Within western culture, universities and monasteries increasingly became the citadels of research from around the middle ages on. Women were not synonymous with these places. But it was not all blokes – In 1608 Juliana Morell, a Spanish woman, is thought to have become the first woman to earn a doctorate degree in law (indeed, the first woman to earn any type of university degree).

## Women researchers in Canterbury

If we fast forward a few hundred years and locate ourselves back in Canterbury New Zealand – we see a group of women involved in the research who were vital for the building of the colonial city, province and indeed the Nation.

Not that the importance of women research arrived with the docking of the first four ships. The knowledge of the new environment that the very first colonists of these islands acquired were vital to establishing flourishing communities. The newly arrived Māori women had to quickly research the local produce to see if it was safe for their families to consume. Pre-colonial Māori woman also had a vital role in collecting – researching – and transmitting knowledge and culture. Maori culture was an oral culture. Waiata, haka, and whakatauki were therefore the primary means of transmitting knowledge. That women played an important role in the maintenance and transmittal of iwi history and knowledge is clear from the numbers of waiata tawhito that have been composed by women.

With colonisation came a group of women, imbued with nineteenth century liberalism and a staunch belief in egalitarianism, who were intent on making life for women in the Canterbury Colony different from the Britain they had left behind. Colonial women such as Sarah Courage at Leithfield Beach chronicled their lives through diaries – Sarah's diary that was later published under the title *Lights and Shadows of Colonial Life* has become an important source for knowing about colonial Canterbury and Christchurch.

By the late nineteenth century, Canterbury had become a hotbed of thinking and organising of a group of women who were about to make a number of firsts happen. Christchurch was of course the home of Kate Sheppard and a number of the key women of the suffrage movement.

Women were also entering the fledgling college of the University of New Zealand Canterbury College and undertaking research in its more traditional sense. Helen Connon enrolled as Canterbury College's first woman student. Matriculating in 1876, she graduated BA in 1880,

becoming the second woman arts graduate in the British Empire. When she gained her MA with first-class honours in English and Latin in 1881, she was the first woman in the British Empire to win a degree with honours.

From the 1870s, along with their campaign for the vote, women's organisations increasingly focused on a broad range of issues and research underpinned their endeavours. After the vote was won in 1893 many new groups appeared that focused on a broad range of issues that aimed to transform the nation.

- the status of women within marriage, particularly their economic independence
- seeking equal divorce laws
- promoting social purity (sexual chastity and faithfulness)
- the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act
- removal of 'civil disabilities' (such as women not being allowed to hold some types of public office)
- gaining employment rights.

In Christchurch, The Canterbury Women's Institute (CWI), formed in 1892, had four 'departments': literary, economic, hygiene and domestic science. Its members included some of the best-known feminists of the time, including Kate Sheppard, her sister Isabel May, and Edith Searle Grossmann. At first the Institute had male as well as female members, including well-known women's dress reformer James Wilkinson.

As well as the standard activities – discussing issues of concern, writing letters and organising deputations – the institute held women's conferences and in 1896 convened the first meeting of the National Council of Women.

The CWI pushed over many years for the election of women to public bodies. Several members were elected to local charitable aid and hospital boards, and in 1917 CWI member Ada Wells became the first woman on the Christchurch City Council.

This all sounds suspiciously like research to me.

This is also where the very organisation that has organised this breakfast fits in.

The Canterbury Women's Club was established on 25th September, 1913 by three women –

- Jessie Mackay - A Poet, teacher and Lady Editor of The PRESS
- Blanche Baughan - A Poet, Travel Writer, Founder of the NZ Howard League for Penal Reform
- Mary Colborne-Veel - Christchurch Poet and a regular contributor to The PRESS and to the New Zealand School Journal.

And it began in the lounge of the Grand Theatre in Cathedral Square.

These three women had been colleagues, friends and supporters of Kate Sheppard. In 1913 the National Council of Women was in recess. The three women concerned about the gap that this had left for women. From the start, they were strict - no politics or religion was to be discussed.

Rather the focus was on the creative contributions of women – attracting poets, writers, artists, researchers, innovators, music, play-reading, discussions, friendships etc

Like Kate Sheppard they were concerned about the disruption and disintegration of families and communities by violence and abuse. A strong focus on education for women as an agent of renewal within the community is clear. They wrote about a new and emerging country and the community in a global context. They contributed in any way that was open to them – art, crafts, poetry, drama, editorials, music, editorials, (e.g. The Press, the London Spectator,) formal writings etc..

Importantly the Club provided a place other than private homes for women to meet together and talk about ideas and thinking. The Club also provided opportunities to learn various skills including leadership and meeting procedure, in a supportive setting. Social and intellectual companionship was found as well as “circles” that catered to women’s interests such as play-reading, arts, crafts, bridge etc.

Indeed if we go back to our original definition of research there are a myriad other women through our past who while the academy may not have deemed them researchers have none the less been active in this pursuit.

- Nurse Maude (1862-1935) – medical, founded the District Nursing scheme. Full biography attached.
- Hariata Pitini-Morera (1871/72?-1938) – history and botany. Lived and worked in the general area not specifically Christchurch.

And we have not even begun to talk about the artistic and literary women who were researching their new city and province through their endeavours.

## **The Present**

Let’s use the fast forward button again and bring ourselves to the present.

I am sure it has escaped no-one in this room’s notice that we got us a city to rebuild. There is the physical recovery that we are all chronicling on our minds – each completed piece of road, every new building – every new landmark to replace what we have lost.

But it is so important that within this construction bonanza that there is solid research and critical thought. We need research to underpin our recovery and to understand what we have been through. It is also really important that we chronicle what we have been through – like latter day Sarah Courages with her diary.

This is where work such as the NCW's work in recording women's stories from the earthquakes is so important. The earthquakes and their aftermath were gendered and we need ways of researching that understanding that more fully in the future.

I want to be clear, however, not all research should be about the earthquakes and our recovery. What we need is a flourishing network of women who are committed to understanding their world better through their research. From this comes an exciting and innovative culture where exciting things can happen. The nineteenth and early twentieth century women I have talked about today did not set about researching building a city in the new world – instead they applied their considerable talents and intellects to questions that interested them and were important to their worlds.

Importantly, however, these were part of a strong network and community of women through various women's organisations. They viewed their questioning of the world around them and their desire for change as a team pursuit and not an individual sport. In short they sought and created networks.

Importantly, finding spaces for themselves outside of their homes was also vital. This was one of the very reasons that the Canterbury Women's Club was formed.

While we 21<sup>st</sup> women have blasted through several glass ceilings and gained access to common rooms and boardrooms – there is still a need for spaces for women to congregate and network. The asset of the Canterbury Women's Club house stands as strong now (well it will once the eq repairs are done) as it did at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in providing this space.

## Conclusion

The traditional narrative of our city and our region's identity is writ large with tales of stoic individuals who could do pretty much anything with a bit of "2. They were stoic and plucky, resilient and determined and were intent on the practical – **these words seem familiar in our current context?**

Research and thinking have long been seen as the very opposite of our imagined identity. However, I believe that research in its broadest form was critical to us establishing and building Christchurch and Canterbury in the first place. Women were central to this. Social reform and the research to back it up was driven by a determined group of women.

Our recovery will be enriched by the work of women researchers in Canterbury today.

Your creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of people, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications is vital .