

Gendered enterprise: women and Australian business history

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Abstract

This special issue examines women and Australian business history. Contributions explore women's entrepreneurship in small urban businesses, side hustles, agriculture, and family companies. Articles highlight the importance of women's businesses, as a financial necessity for women, their families, and their communities. Authors examine the barriers for women in business, including legislation, licensing, societal expectations, and discrimination. Articles also explore women's intersections with other demographic characteristics, with access to enterprise mediated by class and the rural-urban divide. Finally, contributions examine the way traditional archives have obscured histories of businesswomen, and the opportunities offered by feminist historical methodologies for studying business history.

This special issue explores the place of women in Australian business history. Although women have been crucial for the functioning of Australian businesses, they have been “absent from dominant narratives” about them (Scott 1998: 244). Prior to the 1990s, business history was overwhelmingly “man-made”, with men dominant in the voices of corporate archives, as the authors of business historical research and, subsequently, as subjects of study (Honeyman 2001; Yeager 2005; Durepos et al., 2017; Dean et al. 2024). Men have undoubtedly had access to most business opportunities and, as Beatrice Craig has noted, “one does not search for what one believes does not exist” (Craig 2015: 4; Durepos et al. 2017; Ginalski et al. 2023). Business was seen as the natural domain of men, with the traits needed for success – ambition, aggression and competitiveness – assumed to naturally reside within masculinity (Ginalski et al. 2023; Gamber 1998). Business history, adopting the Chandlerian emphasis on large, managerial conglomerates, dismissed the smaller businesses in so-called ‘feminine’ sectors that women often had access to (Ginalski et al. 2023; Gamber 1998; Baijot and Le Chapelain 2022). Women were also hidden in the source material, with corporate archives “dominated by male voices and male concerns” (Durepos et al. 2017: 1262). Men imbued written records, including diaries, letters and memoirs, with patriarchal preconceptions about who should be owning and managing businesses (Yule 2012; Bishop 2015a; Baijot and Le Chapelain 2022). Women’s written records are also limited, as those with the time and leisure to write diaries were often wealthy women who conformed to traditional feminine stereotypes, rather than those who needed or wanted to run a business (Bishop 2015a). Statistical sources have been subject to the predilections of the relevant statistician, with legal barriers to women’s financial independence, and problems representing women as economic actors in their own right, rendering women invisible (Deacon 1985; Alford 1986).

Feminist historians similarly sidelined the study of businesswomen, under the assumption that “because women married young and had large families [...] it was difficult for them to pursue interests outside the home” (Kingston 2006: 59). As with business historians, disbelief in women’s ability to own and operate businesses contributed to a failure to look for them (Bishop 2015a; Bishop 2015b; Kingston 1975; Bevege et al. 1982; Ryan and Conlon 1989; Aston and Bishop 2020). Feminist historians subsequently focussed on the retreat of middle-class white women into the domestic sphere in the nineteenth century, the structural barriers to their participation in the economy, and their gradual progression out of the home once those restrictions lost their zeal (Alford 1984; Davidoff and Hall 1987; Lake 1996; Rendall 1985; Vickery 1993; Baijot and Le Chapelain 2022). Some focussed on valuing the market contribution of women’s domestic labour (Deacon 1985; Alford 1986). Others examined women’s employment rather than those who owned and operated businesses (Alford 1984; Oxley 1996;

Anderson 1992; Kingston 1975; Bevege et al. 1982; Ryan and Conlon 1989). Although feminist history has had an appropriate focus on the restrictions placed on women in the business world, a failure to look for women in business has neglected the myriad ways women have resisted, adapted to, or overcome these barriers.

From the 1990s, historians sought to 're-engage' business history. Complicating the simple division of work and home, historians have uncovered women's entrepreneurialism in a range of industries, geographies and time periods (Aston and Bishop eds 2020; Matthews 1984; Craig 2015; Yeager 1999; Kwolek-Folland 1994; Maltby and Rutterford 2006; Aston and Di Martino 2017; Yates 2022; Dean et al., 2024; Mills and Williams 2024). Far outside the ghetto of traditional domestic activities, this research has found women operating myriad small businesses such as schools, boarding houses, seamstresses, and laundries (Scott 1998; Bishop 2015a; Baijot and Le Chapelain 2022; Craig 2020). Despite legal barriers to their financial independence, including coverture laws preventing women owning property, entering into contracts, or holding bank accounts in their own name, as well as social expectations regarding male breadwinners and working mothers, women were often compelled by the "economic realities of life" to provide for themselves and their families (Bishop 2015b: 184; Aston 2016; Bishop 2015a, 2019; Baskerville 2008; Aston and Bishop 2020; Craig 2015; Gamber 1997; Baijot and Le Chapelain 2022; Van Lieshout et al., 2019; Wright 2003; Erickson 2024; Minchinton 2017; Wright 2004). Small businesses had low barriers to entry, required little startup capital, and could often be combined with women's domestic and caring obligations. Although this has presented several challenges for historians, research has confirmed that women's entrepreneurship was more common than previously thought, and was often as successful and long-lasting as male-run businesses (Bishop 2015a; Craig 2020; Aston and Bishop eds 2020).

Although entrepreneurial women faced myriad legal and social barriers, others have examined women's relatively greater autonomy through finance and investment (Maltby and Rutterford 2006; Aston and Di Martino 2017; Yates 2022). Research has found women investors as far back as the seventeenth century in North America and Europe, with their prevalence increasing alongside the democratisation of share ownership more generally throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Laurence et al. 2009; Rosenhaft 2009; Damiano 2021; Craig 2015; Rutterford et al. 2011; Acheson et al. 2021). Although investing was only available to wealthy women, in a similar way to those operating small business, investing was driven by financial necessity in the face of restrictions on property ownership, unequal wages, and women's concern for their age, health, or the death of their husband (Fleming et al., this issue). These constraints have been found to govern women's investment behaviours, with women found to

be risk averse due to restrictions on their ability to participate fully in the formal economy (Licini 2009).

Family business presented mixed prospects for women. Although some have found that family connections were responsible for some women's access to business leadership positions (Lluch and Salvaj 2022; Tumbe 2022; Ginalski 2022; Rinaldi and Tagliazucchi 2021), most women were invisible within family companies (Colli 2003; Ginalski et al. 2023; Colli and Rose 2008; Nordlund Edvinsson 2016; Fernandez Perez and Colli 2013; Still 1994; Choi 1998; Nagata 2020). Family businesses have been bound by the *primogeniture criterion* (succession through the first-born male), with succession choice dependent on ideals of family lineage that necessarily pass through the male line (Maseda et al., 2022; Ferry 1999; Alston 1995). As such, women in family business have been responsible for reproductive labour, while also running households, brokering social contacts, hosting events, performing charity work, and acting as unpaid administrative assistants to their entrepreneurial husbands (Connell 2010; Nordlund Edvinsson 2016; Wright 2021; Still 1994; Kanter 1977; Wajcman 2013; Callan and Ardener 2022; Popp 2012; Kamp 2018; Nagata 2020). Although such women have been very wealthy – indeed women from large business families were often stock market investors – the intertwining of business and family restricted their ability to hold a formal role in the business (Maseda et al. 2022). Instead, women in family companies were relied upon for their labour, but were defined by their familial role rather than their role in the business (Russell 1988; Aston and Bishop 2020: 13).

Finally, recent research has examined women's place in corporate leadership. Women – with the exception of a small number of female family members – were excluded from formal corporate leadership positions for much of the twentieth century (Lluch and Salvaj 2022; Tumbe 2022; Ginalski 2022; Rinaldi and Tagliazucchi 2022; Wright 2021). Corporate leaders have been drawn from the ranks of top corporate professionals, with women's exclusion from corporate-professional training, as well as structural barriers such as the 'marriage bar', restricting their leadership appointments (Wright and Forsyth 2021; Forsyth 2019). Research has also found that women were locked out of dense corporate networks amongst the 'old boys' club', in which new directors were appointed based on personal recommendations amongst existing (male) members of the community (Ginalski et al. 2023; Lluch and Salvaj 2022). There was a coordinated entry of women to corporate leadership positions in the latter decades of the twentieth century, with the disintegration of the old boys networks, alongside the educational and workplace gains of the transnational second wave feminist Women's Movement,

contributing to women's ability to be appointed to management or board positions (Wright et al. 2023; Ginalski 2022; Rinaldi and Tagliazucchi 2022).

This special issue contributes to recent efforts to engender Australian business history. Most mainstream Australian business history research has minimised the place of women, and the gendered dimensions of Australian business (Fleming et al. 2004; Ville 2000; Merrett 2015; Keneley 2020). Although a growing number of studies from Australian feminist history have reminded us that women have always been key agents in the economy, a disinterest in entrepreneurialism has contributed to the neglect of female business owners (Wright 2003; Woollacott 2015; Wright 2021; Kamp 2018). Catherine Bishop's (2015a) pioneering work on small business was the first, well overdue, contribution to women and Australian business history (see also Bishop 2014, 2015b, 2020, 2023; Bishop et al. 2021). Others have followed, with research on women in corporate leadership, the professions, and family business expanding our knowledge of women's entrepreneurial activities (Wright 2021, 2024; Forsyth 2019; Fong 2021; Dickenson 2016; Crawford 2020, 2023; Fitch and Third 2014; Kamp 2018).

This collection of papers demonstrates the opportunities for twenty-first century researchers seeking to understand Australia's 'gendered enterprise'. Access to and, increasingly, digitization of, newspapers, trade directories, insolvency records, court documents, stock exchange registers, rates books, oral history interviews and registers of bank account holders have revealed the types, locations, ownership and longevity of women's businesses (for more, see Bishop 2021). Fleming et al. (2024) utilise shareholder lists and newspaper reports to investigate the nature and extent of stock market investing amongst Australian women in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Bishop and Hoskin (2024) rely upon legislation, court documents and newspapers to investigate the disconnect between the letter of the law and the practices of hotel licensing courts in New Zealand, New South Wales and Victoria in the long-nineteenth century. Prowse (2024) uses a variety of archival and digital records – principally oral history interviews, court records, newspapers, diaries and digital media – to explore how Australian rural and farming women have engaged in, and relied upon, 'side hustles' throughout the twentieth century. Wright (2024) incorporates business archives, newspaper sources, and public registers of prominent businesspeople to explore the gendered succession practices of large Australian family companies. Finally, McIntyre (2024) repurposes qualitative data from a large-scale oral history project to understand women's access to, and experiences in, leadership positions of Australian wine production enterprises in the second half of the twentieth century.

Articles examine the barriers for women in the business world. Several highlight the role of the state in rendering women economically dependent, including laws of coverture which dictated that women be subsumed within the social and legal identity of their father, brother, or husband. Although some women were able to circumvent coverture laws or make them work in their favour, they presented an insurmountable barrier to many (Bishop and Hoskin 2024; Fleming et al. 2024; Wright 2024). Licencing laws, discussed in detail in Bishop and Hoskin (2024), were an additional tool used by the state to restrict women's access to business. Employment conditions – including the marriage bar enacted by the Australian public service, and the Harvester Judgement which enshrined unequal wages – restricted women's access to the paid workforce and pushed them into investing or informal enterprises (Wright 2024; Fleming et al. 2024; Prowse 2024).

Australian society presented intangible, though equally forceful, barriers to women in business. Although Australian society was relatively egalitarian regarding class, and readily adopted suffrage and second wave feminist movements, the predominance of the nuclear family, and a misogynistic, larrikin culture conferred women to a low social status (Dixson 1976; Alford 1984). Expectations of female domesticity and business incompetence, alongside ideals of male lineage and business competence, prevailed across the case studies (Bishop and Hoskin 2024; Prowse 2024; Wright 2024; McIntyre 2024). In business, as in society, women were seen as caretakers, mothers and homemakers, responsible for raising children and maintaining the home and social life of their husbands, rather than formal positions of business influence. Although the status of Australian women changed dramatically across the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries – including suffrage, property ownership, admittance to the professions, and an expanded place in the workforce – in most of the articles, women's entrepreneurial success was constrained by the institution of the family (Prowse 2024; McIntyre 2024; Wright 2024; Fleming et al. 2024). Family enterprises tended to raise boys and girls differently, and any business, if permitted at all, had to harmonise with women's 'core' responsibilities of wife and mother (McIntyre 2024; Wright 2024; Fleming et al. 2024, Prowse 2024).

It is tempting to consider the relative importance of women's business. In making the case for studying women's business, scholars often adopt the 'business case', or the argument that women are naturally distinctive entrepreneurs, and that this distinctiveness has contributed to businesses that are more, or less, successful compared to those run by men (Ginalski et al. 2023; Hoobler et al. 2018). This hypothesis presents several challenges, namely the lack of consensus on measures of business 'success'. Traditional business history gravitates towards size, scale, and profitability, though longevity and sustainability have become important measures in recent

years. Regardless of the specific measure of success, the articles in this special issue suggest that women's success may be contaminated by structural factors, including bias in the source material (Prowse 2024; Wright 2024), women's lack of access to training and mentorship (Wright 2024; McIntyre 2024), attitudinal barriers to women in business (Bishop and Hoskin 2024; Wright 2024), and gendered financial or licensing constraints (Fleming et al. 2024; Prowse 2024; Bishop and Hoskin 2024). The 'business case' also prioritises sex-based differences, reproducing gender stereotypes and the gendered division of labour by assigning all women 'feminine' business characteristics such as sustainability, collaboration, and stakeholder relationships. Most importantly, the business case contributes to the "depoliticization of gender inequality", requiring women prove their relevance on the terms of the patriarchal society that restricted their access to the business world in the first place (Ginalski et al. 2023: 2).

As such, the articles in this special issue explore women's 'success' as not simply as a function of their feminine disposition, but mediated through the institutions in which women's lived. Women's business was often initiated by restrictions in women's access to the formal labour market, with barriers to finance and licensing contributing to enterprise that was low risk, and required little startup capital or specialised equipment (Fleming et al. 2024; Prowse 2024). Women's entrepreneurial abilities were crucial for business success, with Prowse (2024) highlighting the reliance on women's 'side hustles' for farming families during poor seasons; Wright (2024) exploring the way male retail entrepreneurs used female family members to connect with female customers; and McIntyre (2024) detailing the myriad critical non-farming wine production operations that fell under the purview of 'women's work'. Although ideals of femininity and respectability acted as a constraint for most, some women found ways to exploit societal attitudes to promote their business (McIntyre 2024; Prowse 2024; Bishop and Hoskin 2024). Women's access to business was also dependent on various demographic intersections, with enterprise a financial necessity for working class women (Prowse 2024; Bishop and Hoskin 2024), but an unacceptable activity for women from upper-class backgrounds (Wright 2024; Fleming et al. 2024). Prospects for rural women were limited by distance, a lack of opportunities, challenges accessing childcare, and conservatism from rural men (Prowse 2024; McIntyre 2024). Some made use of their intersectional privileges, with Fleming et al. (2024) discussing the way wealthy women used business investments to liberate themselves from marriage and work; and Wright (2024) exploring the way some women were able to leverage family connections to access business leadership. Ultimately, these articles support Bishop's (2015) efforts by finding that women have, indeed, always been in business, and have done so by adapting to a hostile entrepreneurial environment.

The articles in this special issue presents several provocations for future research, inviting us to consider the importance of women's business, even though it looked different from those operated by men. Challenges remain for research on women and Australian business history, particularly limited source materials and the extra effort required to 'find' women in business archives. Nevertheless, fruitful case studies may include histories of women inventors and patenting, women's access to startup capital, femininity and business marketing, and professional women and the marriage bar. This issue has foregrounded women and (binary) gender, with some exploration of class and the rural-urban divide, though there remain larger questions about the way intersectional structures of privilege have enabled and constrained women's access to entrepreneurship. In particular, these articles present a business community that is overwhelmingly white. Although this limitation underscores the prevalence of race-based hierarchies in both the academy and in the creation of business archives, there is certainly important work possible on non-white Australian businesswomen (for recent efforts, see Fong 2021). Cross-country comparisons present another avenue for future research, with recent efforts by global teams of researchers highlighting the importance of both national institutions, and transnational social movements, for shaping women's entrepreneurial prospects (Aston and Bishop eds. 2020; Ginalski et al. 2023).

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