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Title:

Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, *Distant Sisters. Australasian Women and the International Struggle for the Vote, 1880-1914*, by James Keating, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2020, £80.00 Hardcover.

Review:

It is a time old but inescapably true observation that when researching women's history, we cannot avoid the sense of fragmentary experiences as we piece together past lives by navigating our way in, through and across the gaps in the archives. At the time that they were compiling their papers in the hopes of getting them into archives, women activists too were aware of the silences or omissions plaguing women's history. As James Keating explains in *Distant Sisters. Australasian Women and the International Struggle for the Vote, 1880-1914*, some women's organisations like the World's Women's Christian and Temperance Union (WCTU) combatted this potential for gaps by directing that all branches keep thorough records. Their extensive archives have informed the work of feminist historians, including Keating himself. However, others, whether smaller organisations or individual women activists, have worked to cobble together fragmentary evidence of their labours through letters, reports, postcards, diaries, photographs, souvenirs and more. In this way, they have sought to represent the story of their trials and opportunities, failures and successes. For us, and for them, the result is and often has been 'messy', writes Keating. He has, he asserts, chosen to revel in these 'messy stories' – rather than indulge in the 'success histories' – of the turn-of-the-century women's movement.

Distant Sisters has a twofold remit. On the one hand, it recovers a forgotten regional suffrage history as it situates the Australian and the New Zealand suffrage movements and achievements side by side. In many ways it is a regional history. On the other hand, it also analyses Australasian suffragists' dedication to fostering international connections and traces their successful or failed ventures in this realm, thereby producing a more expansive history of women's internationalism. The subject of this book are white women who identified with the Australasian region but who, as the Keating illuminates, were rarely content to confine themselves to that region when the whole world – or at least the English-speaking parts of that world – seemed to beckon them. Unfortunately for them, factors beyond their control rendered many of their international engagements less than triumphant.

The book is divided into five chapters, covering a range of connected organisations and themes. The first of these looks at suffrage internationalism through the records of the WCTU. The second examines Australasian suffragists and the international suffrage movement. The third and fourth chapters look at suffragists' exchange of letters and their writing for the advocacy press. While the final chapter analyses suffragists physically travelling the world. It is testament to Keating's significant historical skills and sensibilities that he recovers and illuminates intertwining regional and transnational themes while also being true to the more intimate dimensions of the story – or, of course, the stories – of suffragism. He does this by exploring individual activists' articulation of their aspirations, hopes, desires, fears and frustrations as they worked to forge inter-colonial and inter-national relations. For this reader at least, two themes stand out as being particularly demonstrative of the opportunities and challenges that Australasian women faced when trying to forge inter-colonial and inter-national relations, namely, disunity at home and the costs and benefits of travelling abroad.

Australia became a nation in 1901 when the six British colonies of New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania united to form the Commonwealth of Australia. The new parliament became one of the first globally to grant women both the right to vote and to stand for parliament (1902, even though the first woman elected to commonwealth parliament was not until 1943). However, this national milestone has often obscured the fact that, between 1894 and 1908, the disparate colonies (states after 1901) fought for and won the right to vote in individual, divisive and sometimes bitter campaigns. Through a combination of colourful anecdotes and rich analysis, *Distant Sisters* reveals the degree to which allegiance to former colony over that to the new nation created tension and dissent among female activists; those who, for example, were encumbered with choosing just one woman to represent all women of the nation at international gatherings (for instance, at those of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance). It demonstrates the extent to which disunity in the emerging commonwealth hampered Australian suffragists' ability to play a more prominent role in the wider international suffrage movement.

Another insightful aspect of the book is the light it shines on travelling Australasian suffragists' experiences when confronted with the apparent opportunities of the 'progressive' New World and restrictive hierarchies of the old imperial world. By way of example, Keating recounts renowned Scottish-born South Australian suffragist Catherine Helen Spence's travels to the US, where she toured around delivering a series of successful, paid lectures. He then juxtaposes her positive experiences in America with her reception in Britain, where she felt depressingly humbled by the lack of value attached to her 'colonial' experiences. More hauntingly, Keating also presents the story of pioneering New Zealand suffragist Kate Sheppard who suffered what can only be described as a nervous breakdown during only her second appearance in British lecture halls. Sheppard came to embody the 'distant sister' role by retreating from 'travelling propaganda' to 'become a wistful observer at the margins of the international women's movement' (p.179). In Keating's retelling of the story, the hierarchies of empire had emerged to overshadow antipodean success narratives and to expose the limitations of antipodean women's aspirations for internationalism.

Distant Sisters is a seamlessly and beautifully written, as well as rigorously researched, account of the intersecting ambitions, aspirations, endeavours, successes and failures of political women connected by virtue of their place in the Australasian region. It is a masterful recount of the 'messy stories' both underpinning and arising out of Australasian suffrage success.

