



# Wise and Wonderful Women



**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewers are advised that this exhibition may contain images of people who have died.**

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# Introduction

**Academic women have played a central role in the making of Adelaide's universities. Over the last fifty years, women have entered universities in growing numbers. They developed careers, produced internationally-acclaimed research, taught and mentored students, and have created diverse pathways for following generations.**

The *Wise and Wonderful Women* exhibition is based on oral histories with retired women who worked at the three South

Australian universities during the period 1970 to 2024. Participants, drawn from across the academy, had expertise in the social sciences, visual arts, humanities, law, economics, architecture, nursing, psychology, mathematics, physics, and biology. Most belonged to the 'baby boomer' generation, though some were older. They were distinctive as a group of women for whom professional careers opened in large numbers for the first time.

Looking back on their working lives, they tell a story of how women made careers in male-dominated institutions and fought to transform their environments to support women's success. This exhibition celebrates the important work they performed in shaping our institutions today.



Women students and staff, 1918. University of Adelaide Archives

# A Door Opens

**A route to an academic career for women was still to be developed in the decades following the Second World War and so women's entry into academic roles in colleges, institutes and universities was often indirect. The women represented in this exhibition came to academic work through a range of pathways.**

A minority came from relatively wealthy families, were well-educated, expected a career – often in teaching – and finding work in universities was an extension of this expectation. Others benefited from Commonwealth scholarships or became bonded school teachers, in lieu of paying fees to attend university. They were often the first in their families to attend university. From there, they found their way into teaching in Colleges of Advanced Education

or had tutoring roles in universities. The amalgamation of Colleges of Advanced Education with universities occurred under the Dawkins education reforms of the Hawke government in the late 1980s. These reforms brought many women into universities.

The new university structures of the 1990s aimed to reshape the academic workforce. PhDs were increasingly required of staff and new industrial agreements created opportunities for teaching staff to advance. Some women used this opportunity to further develop their research profile, enabling them to move up the academic ladder.

Because few women aspired to be academics when they left school, they described their careers as those of 'accidental academics', individuals who seized opportunities as they arose and had their fair share of 'luck'. Careers for this generation required significant improvisation and creativity as they navigated what was necessary for academic women to succeed in the university.



University of Adelaide Council Meeting - Fay Gale and other members, c1977.  
University of Adelaide, Special Collections, Archives, Series 695, Item 1147



***“I sort of fell into academia. It was, in a way, a series of fortunate events or accidents.”***

**- Anon**



Statue of Professor Fay Gale, University of Adelaide, 2025.  
Courtesy Prudence Black

# Climbing the Ladder

## **Academic women were involved in all parts of academic life.**

Research was often transformative for academic women. Many were passionate about their studies, both the process and what they discovered. Because universities valued research, high-quality scholarship also offered women a sense of personal achievement and a path to international recognition. More recently growing expectations for research productivity within universities could dampen the joy, pushing people to narrow the scope of research and publishing.

Teaching played an important role in the lives of most academic women. Some women remained in predominantly teaching

roles throughout their careers, often having lacked support for research in the early years. Others balanced teaching with research or other responsibilities. Many women enjoyed teaching; some loved it. Almost all agreed that it was hard work that contributed to feelings of fatigue and tiredness.

Several women represented in this exhibition took on leadership roles in universities, with some reaching senior positions including Vice Chancellor. New styles of management of universities brought with it a whole new set of opportunities and challenges. Academic leaders had to tread deftly within highly politicised environments, at times managing distressing situations. They also found opportunities to improve conditions for staff and students.





# Jennifer A. McMahon

**Jennifer A. McMahon (1956-2023) was the first woman Professor of Philosophy at the University of Adelaide and a leading international scholar in the field of aesthetics. McMahon studied Fine Arts and Education and was a successful artist, educator and critic in Melbourne. Her work led her to investigate the nature of creativity, artistic convention, aesthetic perception, appreciation and pleasure while undertaking a master's degree at the University of Melbourne, followed by a PhD in Philosophy at the ANU.**

Her early research work led to a highly novel way of linking aesthetic perception to the emerging fields of cognitive science and neuroscience, while later research focussed on the aesthetic, ethical and social dimensions of contemporary art practice.

McMahon's books include the groundbreaking *Aesthetics and Material Beauty* (2007) and *Art and Ethics in a Material World* (2014), and her edited collections include the inaugural issue of the *Australasian Philosophical Review* (2017) on 'The Pleasure of Art', *Social Aesthetics and Moral Judgment* (2018), and a focus issue of *Curator: The Museum Journal* (2019) on 'The Ancient Quarrel Between Art and Philosophy in Contemporary Visual Art Exhibitions'.

After joining the University in 2002 (from the University of Canberra), McMahon became Head of the Department of



Philosophy in 2010. In 2014 she took on the role of Secretary of the Australasian Association of Philosophy then in 2015, she also became Director of Postgraduate Studies for the Faculty of Arts. In 2018 McMahon served on the Australian Research Council's Excellence in Research for Australia as a Member of its Humanities and Creative Arts Panel.

Following her death, the CEO of the ARC, Ms Judi Zielke commented "Professor McMahon's impact on early-career researchers, in particular women researchers, whom she generously supported over the course of her career, will endure. She will continue to be an inspiration to all."

Between 2016 and 2019, McMahon led an Australian and international team of researchers and artists on an ARC funded Discovery Project, on 'Taste and Community' which also received strong support from the American Society for Aesthetics and the American Philosophical Association.

In June 2019, McMahon was diagnosed with an aggressive breast cancer, followed by protracted treatment. She retired in April 2022 and was immediately appointed Emerita Professor of Philosophy. After a final struggle with an incurable metastatic cancer, McMahon passed away in June 2023.

***“I loved it. I loved the whole time I was at uni. I was there almost 25 years. It was a time with a lot of change. It always seemed to be almost changing all the time, there was something different. So just the structure of it. We were in schools and we were in faculties and we were in divisions.”***

**- Anon**



Above: Tutorial in Lecturer's Office, University of Adelaide, c1985. University of Adelaide, Special Collections, Archives, Series 695, Item 789

Left: Jennifer A. McMahon, Beulah Park, 2002. Courtesy Brendan Ryan.

# Interruptions

**The career paths for many academic women were winding, requiring individuals to balance competing responsibilities, protracted time before attaining a continuing position, sometimes illness, and antiquated attitudes from some colleagues.**

Caring for children was a high-profile issue in the second half of the twentieth century. Most women stopped working or reduced their hours when children were small. University and local childcare centres facilitated time to work and provided important support to help women complete their higher degrees. A number of women mentioned having supportive spouses who were understanding about their needs and desire to work. Reciprocal caring arrangements with other women were also mentioned with academic

women taking inspiration from the working mothers around them: 'it never occurred (to her) she wouldn't work'.


Time to work, however, was always constrained for parents. Child care hours were limited and expensive, forcing mothers to make the most of their time. The cost was a lack of sociability with their colleagues, with limited time in the staff club, and reduced access to the informal networks made through such opportunities. The payoff was notable efficiency!

Caring responsibilities became an issue again towards the end of women's careers. Elderly parents required additional support, but there was little infrastructure to support this work and few employers recognised it as a legitimate demand on women's time. As part of the new 'sandwich generation' providing care for ageing parents played a significant role in the decision of many women to retire.

***"I would take him on the train in the pusher, wheel the pram across to Mackinnon Parade (childcare centre), leave him there, walk back to uni, do some work... I got very good at concentrating when I only had this much time."***

**- Anon**

# Jenni Caruso



Jenni Caruso is an Eastern Arrernte woman, member of the Stolen Generations, and was a historian at the University of Adelaide. As a child, Caruso was removed from her family and placed with a Methodist family in Adelaide. Despite her stepfather being involved in the development of the Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music at the University of Adelaide, she was discouraged from further education: 'I was constantly taught that because I was Aboriginal I did not have the intellectual capacity to undertake university study'. Caruso became a nurse and married. At age 35, she decided to return to education to learn to type, as she wanted to be a secretary. Her teachers encouraged her to go to university and she completed a Diploma in Aboriginal Education at the University of South Australia. This led her to a job in Catholic Education and eventually one in Indigenous Student Support at the University of Adelaide in 1999.

While working at the university, Caruso started studying again, eventually receiving an Honours in History at age 52. From there,

she went into a part-time PhD in History. In 2007, she was encouraged to apply for a job in Aboriginal History in the Department of History and began teaching along with completing her studies. Caruso's PhD, awarded in 2018, on the Stolen Generations was a politically important piece of research. It led to the extension of South Australia's Stolen Generations Reparation Scheme to a wider group of applicants, when she proved that they were removed under South Australian legislation.

Caruso performed significant cultural service to the institution, representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders on many important committees, and working to ensure greater equity in the university. Her cultural work beyond the institution was also significant. She was the recipient of the Gladys Elphick Quiet Achiever Award (2017), the South Australian NAIDOC Lifetime Achievement Award (2018), shortlisted for the Premier's NAIDOC Award (2019), and most recently included in the South Australian Women's Honour Roll.



**"I spent  
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***“I spent half my time rushing back and forth from school pick-ups and things but there were about three young men who were in the same boat and they used to spend a lot of time in the staff club playing pool.”***

- Anon

# Making Space

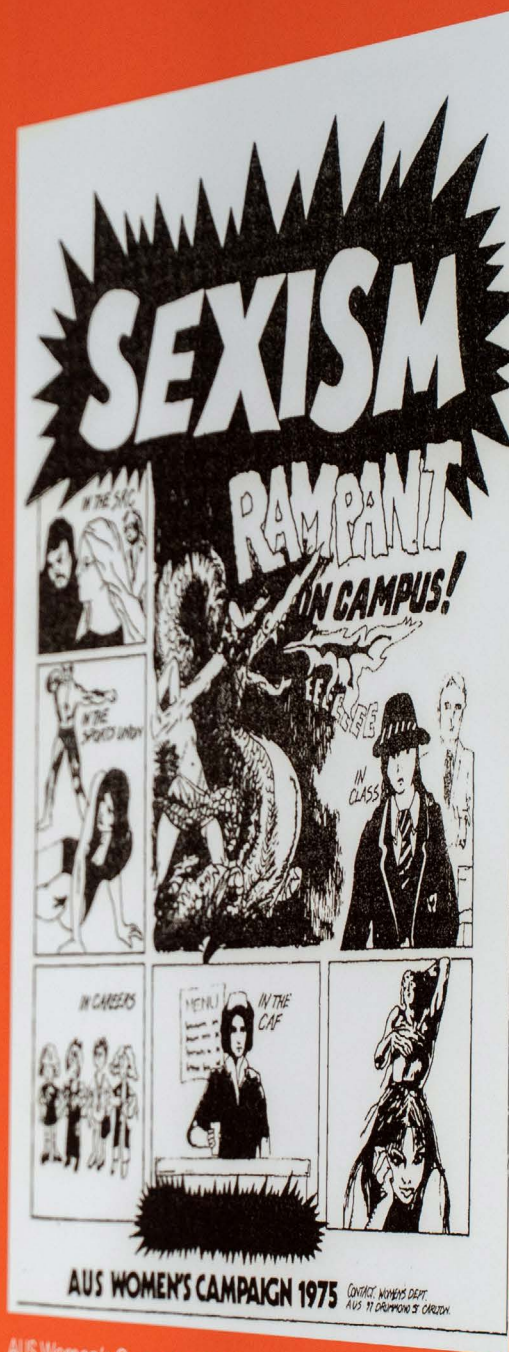
**Universities had been designed for elite men, along a European model. Academia was a vocation to which people were expected to devote many hours. Working culture could be competitive, even macho, and individualistic. Attending events in the evenings or at weekends was important. For some, travel was also necessary for research and international impact.**

That not everyone could easily adapt themselves to this environment was rarely recognised. Women had to fight for their place in the institution. Women who were also

working class or came from minority ethnic or racial groups faced even greater challenges as they tried to find acceptance from colleagues and work within rigid structures.

Many academic women took on the task of reforming universities as spaces where women could flourish. Working parties and committees were set up to develop policy that promoted gender equity, initially increasing female representation and latterly supporting better recognition of women's achievements. Feminist reading groups, women's studies areas, women in leadership programs and similar activities provided women with the language to articulate the injustice they experienced and the tools to push back. Women in leadership sought to change institutional structures to make workplace cultures friendlier to diverse groups.



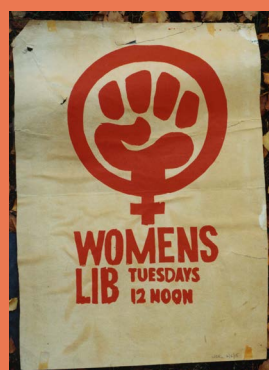
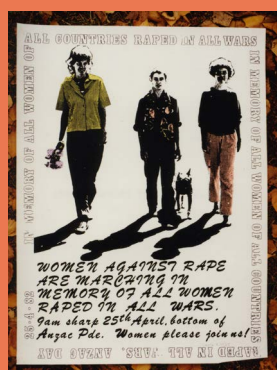
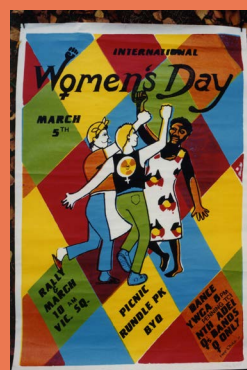
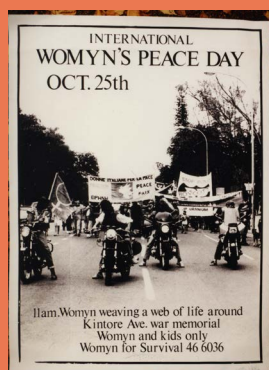
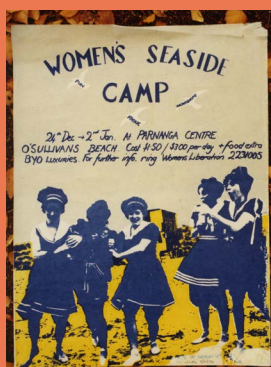
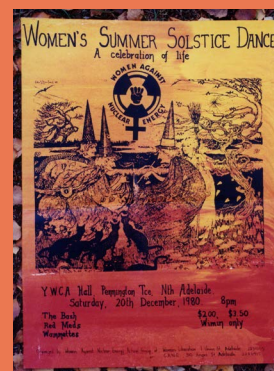
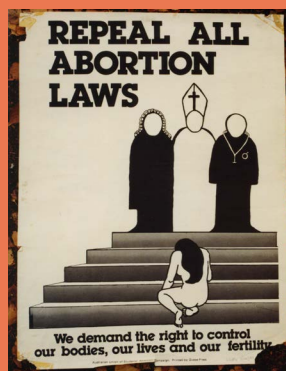
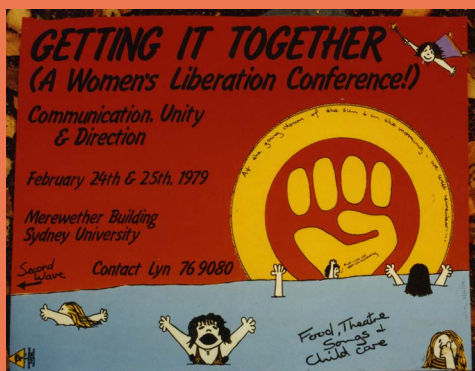


AUS Women's Campaign 1975, March 1976. On Dit,  
Volume 44, Issue 1. University of Adelaide, Special Collections

"I think, for clever women, group support and network support is really crucial and things like women's networking opportunities, women's special conferences, women's special research days, ... we need that, because the institution of the university alone will always have to balance gender and will not bend towards supporting women, because since John Howard in 1987 opportunity has been..."



Women's Studies  
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Left to right, top to bottom: Rape Crisis Centre, c1980s; Getting Together - A Women's Liberation Conference!, 1979; Repeal Abortion Laws, c1980s; Women's Summer Solstice Dance: A Celebration of Life, 1980; Child Care Every Person's Right!, c1980s; Women's Seaside Camp, c1980s; International Women's Year 1975, 1975; Women's Movement Unity Conference, c1980s; Women's Studies Resource Centre, c1980s; International Womyn's Peace Day, c1980s; International Women's Day, c1980s; Women and Labour Conference, c1980s; Women Against Rape, 1982; Rape Crisis Centre: 3rd Birthday and House-Warming, c1980s; Women's Lib, c1980s; Wonder Woman Reads, c1980s. All images: Private Collection. Courtesy Susan Magarey.

# Sue Sheridan

Sue Sheridan was instrumental in teaching courses around women in literature at Magill College of Advanced Education (CAE) and then teaching and researching in Women's Studies at Flinders University from 1987 until her retirement in 2006. Early on she had realised that she 'wasn't going to lead the sort of life that my family expected me to, or other people's families in that time'. Sheridan pursued a PhD in feminist literature, a focus that made it difficult for her to get a job in a traditional English department in the 1970s where the value of such work was not yet appreciated. She struggled to publish her thesis and had little academic mentorship: 'there were very few ... women in a senior enough position to do any mentoring'.

In the 1980s, Sheridan was part of a cohort of women that were integral to developing Women's Studies as an interdisciplinary scholarly discipline at Adelaide and Flinders Universities. The field emerged from work in the CAEs, the Women's Liberation movement, and academic conferences where like-minded women explored the importance of understanding women's experience. Together, they built the foundations of a field of scholarship – including founding journals, developing academic courses and degrees, and creating a community that acted as a



Sue Sheridan. Courtesy Sue Sheridan.

resource for other scholars of women, gender and feminism. 'I just learned so much from Sue', observed one of Sheridan's colleagues.

Sheridan was foundation Reviews Editor for *Australian Feminist Studies* from 1985 to 2005. Her books include *Christina Stead* (1988), *Along the Faultlines: Sex, Race and Nation in Australian Women's Writing 1880s to 1930s* (1995), *Who Was That Woman? The Australian Women's Weekly in the Postwar Years* (2002), *The Fiction of Thea Astley* (2016); as editor, *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism* (1988), *Debutante Nation: Feminism Contests the 1890s* (1993, with Sue Rowley and Susan Magarey) and *Nine Lives: Postwar Women Writers Making their Mark* (2011). Sheridan is well known for her generosity to her students and other scholars.

**'I wasn't going to lead the sort of life that my family expected me to, or other people's families in that time.'**

- Anon

# Dedication

**A life lived within the academy shaped identities, emotions, values, and expectations. Most of the women represented in this exhibition left paid employment around the age of 65, but very few launched into a simple life of leisure.**

Pathways to retirement are rarely neat or clear-cut. Not all women left voluntarily. Redundancy rounds occurred quite regularly in universities, and some women left under circumstances they found distressing. Many explained they retired when the push factors within the institution – conflict with colleagues, rising workloads, changing cultures – combined with personal pull factors, most notably caring responsibilities for parents and ill-health. Few reported leaving simply because it was the ‘right time’ to do so. Many had originally planned to work for longer.

For many, retirement was tied to ‘tiredness’, a term that referred to both physical exhaustion and emotional despair. The demands of the

job, particularly teaching, required energy that some no longer felt they had. Others thought the contemporary university asked too much of them, ‘nothing is ever enough’, and retirement provided an opportunity to leave that behind.

Highly-educated and experienced, all of the women pursued new opportunities in retirement. Many remained committed to research, writing books, holding large grants, and supervising PhD students. Some sat on the boards of important institutions and charities, directing their expertise to improving society or the environment. A few retrained as artists or pursued other new directions.

Reflecting on their careers, many felt conflicted about, even angry, at the institutions they had worked for. The work of making space for women had not been easy and shaped their memories. Despite this, they valued what their careers had allowed them to achieve and the lives they had lived. Leaving behind institutional expectations and politics, many women academics found greater space for pleasure and fulfilment.



Tanya Court, Australia. Onishi Ceramic, 2024. Courtesy Tanya Court.

***“I did retire at 65, which makes me think, really, that many women, like me, have quite truncated careers. We start late and we sort of finish on time.”***

**- Anon**



Judy Morris with her artwork *Michael's Cage*

# Jan Pincombe

**Jan Pincombe was Professor of Midwifery in the School of Nursing and Midwifery, University of South Australia. She left school when she was 15 and became a nurse, studying midwifery in New South Wales in 1968.**

She began clinical teaching on the wards and on moving to Perth had a job at the Western Australian School of Nursing. Along with having two children she would continue her studies at the University of Western Australia taking advantage of the free education provided by the Whitlam government. Later she would undertake a PhD at the University of Wollongong, where she was appointed as a Senior Lecturer in 1984. On moving to Adelaide, she started work at the University of South Australia, eventually becoming Dean of Nursing.

Pincombe was heavily involved in curriculum development for nursing and midwifery students and was the South Australian representative on the National Three Year Midwifery Degree curriculum committee for the development of standards. She was one of four editors for the first textbook in Australia and New Zealand for practicing and student midwives, *Midwifery: Preparation for Practice*



Jan Pincombe, Kingswood, 2024.  
Courtesy Prudence Black.

(2006). As well as being a member of the Australian College of Midwives, she was involved in successful research contracts for the development of Competencies and Standards for Midwives for the Australian Council of Nursing and Midwifery. Jan Pincombe was a member of the reference group that produced *Improving Maternity Services in Australia: The Report of the Maternity Services Review* (2009), which suggested a drastic reform agenda to maternity care provision.

Jan Pincombe retired at 68, but did not stop working. She continues to supervise PhD students, performs grant-funded research, and produce publications. Pincombe thinks that keeping your mind and body active is necessary in retirement and she combines her research with regular swimming.

***“I passionately loved that job for most of my career and gave it my heart and soul. It really hurt me to leave but on the other hand I must say I haven’t had a minute of regret about leaving. I just feel grief yes, but not regret.”***

- Anon

