

The woman on the \$5 note

A pioneering female public intellectual

Helen Thomson

UNBRIDLING THE TONGUES OF WOMEN:
A BIOGRAPHY OF CATHERINE HELEN SPENCE
by Susan Magarey
University of Adelaide Press, \$29.95 pb, 214 pp, 9780980672312

This republication of Susan Magarey's 1985 biography of Catherine Helen Spence commemorates the anniversary of her death, aged eighty-five, in April 1910. In an enlarged and attractive new paperback format, with a revised introduction, its cover sketch of Spence, with upraised hand, in mid-speech, emphasises the key subject, both actual and metaphorical, of women's public speaking. Remarkable as a writer and as a political and social reformer, Spence's status as one of Australia's earliest female public intellectuals is best represented in her more immediately transgressive role as public speaker, a graphic unbridling of the female voice.

The unaltered text of this biography tells the story of a life, a colony and, ultimately, a nation, the personal made political in the parallel liberation of a socially constrained spinster's life and the intellectual and social growth of South Australia, both colonial products of the Enlightenment. The woman whose portrait graced our \$5 note in 2001, marking a century of Federation, provocatively described herself, in her eighties, as a New Woman. But she shifted the term's suggestion of sexual autonomy to a claim for women's responsibility to the state, an ambitious erasure of the nineteenth century's doctrine of gendered, separate spheres.

Magarey, a distinguished historian and feminist, shaped Catherine Spence's life story into a triumphant narrative of female liberation without in any way distorting its facts or indeed Spence's own estimation of her life's direction and its steady enlargement of

opportunities. Her reliance on *Catherine Helen Spence: An Autobiography* (1910) is acknowledged, and considerable. Yet even this key text is read differently in 2009 from its reading in 1985, or indeed, 1971, when the original thesis for this biography was written.

A comparison of the original and the new introductions reveals not only the considerable increase in scholarship in the twenty-five years between them, but more crucially, the shift in historical approaches, including feminist readings. The 1985 introduction stresses the contemporary importance of a story of female struggle and triumph such as Spence's at a time when the issues raised – the parallel battles between capital and labour, and patriarchy and feminism, the persistence of separate spheres – were still current. Today we might say that they always will be, but a more confident and nuanced feminism (not to be confused with the notion of post-feminism) analyses historical documents in a more searching way.

Thus the new introduction insists on reading the *Autobiography* in two parts, and claims authenticity for only one of them. Although the first person form is retained, the last eight chapters were written, after Spence's death, by her friend Jeanne F. Young, a fact recorded from the outset, but glossed over since the writing was based on close personal acquaintance, Spence's life-long diaries and all her retained notes. All but one year of the diaries and all the notes were discarded or destroyed by Jeanne Young, despite attempts to have them archived.

Possibly modesty prevented Magarey from making too much of the volume she edited of Spence's *Autobiography*, her diary (or most of it) for 1894, and some letters to Alice Henry and Rose Scott, which was published by Wakefield Press in 2005 under the title of *Ever Yours, C.H. Spence*. But Magarey rightly points to this volume in her summary of new sources of information about Spence, in particular to historian Barbara Wall's illuminating annotation of the text of the *Autobiography* in this publication. Importantly, she also amends her original bibliography by noting Wall's definitive *Catherine Helen Spence: A Bibliography*, which can be accessed through the State Library of South Australia's home page.

It is in Magarey's introduction to *Ever Yours* that an extraordinary story is made public, one that underlies her later introduction to the biography. With fresh evidence, Magarey surmises that the destruction of Spence's papers was probably motivated by the desire to hide her outspoken criticism of Young's husband. Yet it is the fate of the one surviving year of her diaries that is heartbreaking. Its owners, who insist on complete anonymity, allowed Magarey one week in 1989 to examine the 1894 diary, not long enough for her to make a complete transcription; and they evidently have no intention of allowing anyone else to see the material, nor to make it public. Constrained by confidentiality, Magarey does not even speculate on what might motivate this behaviour.

In the new introduction, the 1894 diary contents are summarised, and the important differences between the self revealed in the diary, and that in the more formally structured and partly ventriloquised autobiography, are stressed. These are important issues in a book that foregrounds 'voice' in all its political permutations.

The second revision tackled in the later introduction is new scholarship and interpretation. Magarey critiques her own earlier arguments with historian Kay Daniels on the debate that was current in 1985 concerning the imposition of bourgeois attitudes

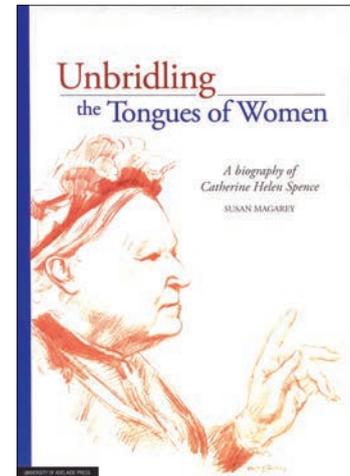
onto working-class women and children by female reformers, such as Spence, in the implementation of welfare reforms such as the 'boarding out' system of caring for orphans that Spence worked so hard to bring about. More pertinent to contemporary concerns is the noting of the sinister subsequent history of this practice in the Stolen Generations. Spence's own racism, entirely typical of her time, is raised here, something she herself became aware of only when she visited America and met African American women engaged in the same social struggles as she was herself.

So the new introduction re-contextualises the biography in important ways and alerts the reader to some fresh issues. Yet the biography itself could never have been described as naïve, or simply adulatory. It valorises an individual who was extraordinarily intelligent, energetic, humane, likeable and well-read. Thus much for the private woman, but she built herself an important place in Australian history with these resources, and a conviction that

her responsibility was to the state and to the reform of public life. The decades she spent, for example, in educating readers and audiences about the workings of proportional representation still have their legacy in the manner in which Australia's upper houses of parliament are elected.

Spence didn't identify herself with 'professional' feminism until quite late in her life, by which time her world travels and international collaborations with like-minded reformers had expanded her horizons, both intellectual and political. Nevertheless, she never lost the awareness of the need to reorder gender relations in every sphere of life. As Wall's *Bibliography* demonstrates, the range and quantity of Spence's writings was astonishing. They included several novels, many periodical articles, pamphlets, sermons, newspaper articles and leaders, on topics that ranged from stories for children to taxation, labour laws to trial marriage. Yet this reissue of Magarey's biography, with its painstaking historical examination of material spoken by Spence in public places, as

well as her printed ideas, might remind a new audience of how important this one woman's life was in bringing us to a year when a female prime minister came to power in Australia. Catherine Spence, Australia's first female political candidate, would certainly have celebrated that moment. ■



Helen Thomson edited and republished several novels by Catherine Spence.

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