

**Volunteering Australia**  
**10<sup>th</sup> National Conference on Volunteering**  
**Melbourne 2-4 June 2004**

***Invisible Histories: Reclaiming Volunteering and Voluntary  
Action in Australian History***

**Dr Melanie Oppenheimer,  
School of Humanities, University of Western Sydney**

In April 1945, towards the end of the Second World War, Dr Lloyd Ross, the Director of Public Relations in the Chifley Labor government's Department of Post War Reconstruction was invited to speak at a conference organised by the Country Women's Association. The CWA had invited fourteen voluntary organizations to contribute to discussions about mapping the future in a post-war Australia. The discussions centred on the role that voluntary organizations could, and should, play in that future. Ross called the conference 'a people's parliament of reconstruction'. [Reconstruction was the buzz word of the time – for when the war was over]. Ross went on to say that

“...there exists a great deal of voluntary activity which is basic to democracy; the success of our post-war plans depends on the co-operation of voluntary activity and Governmental responsibility; there is no clash but a harmony between State and citizen...”

What Dr Lloyd Ross was describing here was the voluntary principle. This was 'voluntary action', a term coined by William Beveridge, the founder of the British welfare state, in action. Lloyd Ross was a great supporter of voluntary action. 'A

government can build a community centre' he argued, 'but only the people in the community can make it work and live'.

Now, some of you may have heard of Lloyd Ross. He was well known as a writer and labour intellectual, journalist, trade unionist and, at one point a member of the communist party. During the war, Lloyd Ross had observed the tremendous community-based civilian volunteering which proliferated across the country. Through the Department of Post-War Reconstruction, he wanted to harness this voluntary action of the war years and incorporate it into the future direction of Australian social and economic policy.

Ross believed that by working together, communities and governments could move forward – culturally, socially and economically. What is interesting about these ideas is that they foreshadow our current interests in community building, citizenship empowerment, voluntary action, and volunteering - what we now call social capital and civil society.

The above story, that is Ross's vision based on the wartime experience, is a fascinating reflection of one example of voluntary action and volunteering in 20<sup>th</sup> century Australian history. But it is a story that you will not find in our history books. There is precious little written about civilian volunteering in WWII (until my book *All Work No Pay*) to explain the phenomenon that so excited Ross; almost nothing written about post-war volunteering (histories tend to focus on the development of the welfare state at the exclusion of the voluntary sector); and in Lloyd Ross' biographies, there is no mention of his interest in

civilian volunteering and voluntary action. Rather, his biographers have focussed on other matters considered more important – more visible.

Whilst research and interest in all aspects of volunteering and the third sector generally have grown exponentially since the 1990s, both internationally and in Australia, Australian historians have been ‘missing in action’ – they have not generally been part of this explosion of interest. Sociologists, social workers, economists, lawyers, accountants, political scientists, environmentalists, business managers, information technologists, those interested in sport, tourism, and practitioners – the list is endless - are part of an evolving multidisciplinary approach to what is now labelled as the ‘third sector’ or ‘voluntary sector’ or ‘non-profit sector’ depending on your national preference. Public debates and discussions over issues of social capital; global initiatives such as the United Nations International Year of the Volunteer in 2001; and the rise of peak organizations such as Volunteering Australia, have all brought volunteering to the fore.

But volunteering and voluntary action, the history of the non-profit sector and its relationship with government, is a largely neglected topic in twentieth century Australian history. Whilst volunteering and voluntary action are integral to our western democratic traditions and both have played key roles in the development of Australian society in the twentieth century, our national histories remain largely silent. Where are the stories of volunteers, volunteering and the voluntary principle in our national histories? They have largely been ignored. They are part of our ‘invisible histories’.

But volunteering is not alone. Until the late 1960s, for example, we had ‘neglected’ the history of half of our population – the history of women was largely ignored until the second wave feminist movement revolutionised how we view history. Here in Australia, Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God’s Police* (1975); Beverley Kingston’s *My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Anne* (1975); and Miriam Dixon’s *The Real Matilda* (1976); irrevocably changed the way we view Australian history, by focussing on and including the experiences of women. Until the 1960s and 1970s with historians such as Rowley and Reynolds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history had suffered a similar fate. Our general history has, however, been enriched by a focus on indigenous history; the history of women and gender relationships; and many other areas. History has become more inclusive, reflecting more accurately our world and our society. Thankfully history is no longer only about rich men, kings, heroes, wars, empires, and high politics.

The role of the historian is crucial in constructing not only how we see ourselves but in selecting what topics we focus on and consider important as a nation. Historians can often present a perspective on the past which has relevance to the present. As historians we attempt to open a window onto the past in order to make sense of the present. We are, essentially, story tellers.

The historian selects key events, key issues, key themes and attempts to construct a ‘legitimate’ past, as they see it. And of course, history is subjective. Despite the best of intentions, historians in each generation see and write in different ways. Hancock’s

*Australia*, published in 1930, or even Manning Clark's six volume *History of Australia*, (written from the 1960s through to the last volume published in 1987) are products of their time. As Stuart Macintyre, Professor of History at the University of Melbourne wrote in the conclusion of his 2003 book on the history wars, 'history is not revealed to us in tablets of stone, it has to be created from the remains of the past. It is not fixed and final but a form of knowledge that is constantly being supplemented and reworked'.(p. 216)

When examining Australia in the twentieth century, historians have not focussed on volunteering or voluntary action. The result is that we have 'neglected' our volunteering history, and the history of the voluntary sector and its relationship with government. We have to ask ourselves why? Why has volunteering been 'invisible' to historians? I believe that there are four main reasons for this neglect.

The first reason reflects a broad view that volunteering is really not important; and therefore not of any historical value. Because it is 'voluntary', that is there is no financial remuneration for the work undertaken, volunteer work is considered of less value than paid work. It has no readily measurable economic value as conventional paid work is judged. It is not measured within the Gross Domestic Produce (GDP), and remains outside the dominant economic framework of our society. In many ways our capitalist system (whilst it undoubtedly relies heavily on volunteering) cannot comprehend volunteering because capitalism has competition and financial reward as its cornerstone, and volunteering does not. In recent years economist Duncan Ironmonger and others have

attempted to imput a dollar value on volunteering to enable its 'economic' value to be counted. But whilst volunteering remains outside of the GDP and whilst governments leave it out of census data, volunteering – despite all the rhetoric - remains 'second class', outside of the mainstream of economic and fiscal policy, and its true value and importance is neglected. Indeed I have been told by colleagues (historians) that the topic of volunteering is 'lightweight' and historians risk their careers if they write about 'non serious' or lightweight topics like volunteering.

The second reason that volunteering has been neglected by historians revolves around the stereotyping of volunteers as 'Lady Bountifuls' – middle and upper class women dispensing largesse and carrying out good deeds often for their own self aggrandisement. Despite the inaccuracy and inherent sexism of such a view, this stereotype has been difficult to dislodge. Although essentially a nineteenth century term, synonymous with women who carried out private philanthropy, satirised by Dickens with Mrs Jellyby, its connotations and usage has continued on into the twentieth century. It is often associated with the exploitative dimensions of volunteering (or the 'dark' side), and is linked to the denigration of women's paid work.

This leads on to the third reason. As I mentioned earlier, second wave feminism in the 1970s revolutionised not only Australian society but also our history. When feminist historians hit the scene in the 1970s, they were looking for ways to promote women in particular ways – they were looking for women who broke barriers; set precedents; challenged the status quo and the patriarchy. In rescuing women from historical oblivion,

these historians whilst doing so much excellent work, unwittingly did volunteering a disservice. They were simply not interested in volunteering – it was too mainstream, too ordinary, something the vast majority of women did. So they decided, quite deliberately in my view, not to write about it.

The fourth and perhaps most important point, of why volunteering is invisible in our history, concerns volunteering, voluntary action and its relationship with government in Australia. This relationship, which some have called a ‘moving frontier’, has played a very important role in 20<sup>th</sup> century Australia. The establishment of the Department of Repatriation (now Veteran’s Affairs) in WWI is but one example. You may or may not be aware that prior to the establishment of the Federal Department of Repatriation in 1917, most of the work of assisting and caring for soldiers on their return from war, and their dependents, was the domain of the voluntary sector. The state had little or no role to play in this area of welfare. But by 1916, it was clear that the patriotic funds, as they were called, were increasingly unable to cope with the increasing demands on their resources. The traditional system of private welfare of assisting ex-servicemen and their dependents, had to be recast. The relationship between the state and voluntary action shifted. Thus, it can be concluded that it is only when major voluntary action is taken over by government, that historians write about it, and it then becomes real and ‘visible’ history.

The Australian experience of World War II also illustrates my arguments. During 1939-45, the volunteer activity of civilians on the home front was remarkable. It was huge, sustained and involved a large number of men, women and children. In my book, *All*

*Work No Pay* I estimated that there were over 8,000 funds established across Australia to assist in some way with the broad war effort. And that these organisations raised between £25/£28 million (which today is approximately A\$1.6 billion).

My research also demonstrated that civilian volunteering crossed class boundaries; it was not the preserve of the middle classes; nor was it only the preserve of women. I do not think that this was an aberration of war, but rather that the war provided an opportunity for the voluntary energy of the people to be exercised to the full.

Lloyd Ross saw this and contemporary evidence suggests that civilian volunteer work was both recognised and encouraged during the war. But something happened between then and now. It disappeared. It became invisible. The fact that the two volumes of the official history of the home front written by Paul Hasluck omitted the story altogether, has not helped matters. Did he not include any discussion of the work and role of civilian volunteers because he simply did not consider it important enough or was it a matter of space? Maybe we'll never know. But the impact of this omission has been critical. It has been particularly distorting when considering the impact of WWII on Australian women.

Australian historians of WWII, feminist or otherwise, have largely focused on women setting precedents and joining the paid workforce – of being able to join the boys in moving into those parts of wartime work which were paid. The focus has also been on the women's auxiliary services (the WAAAF, WAAC, Women's Land Army, AAANS, WAANS etc); and the manpower directorate created in January 1942 which encouraged

and then directed women into paid wartime occupations. There have also been studies on women and sexuality; the influence of the Americans – ‘over sexed, over paid and over here’; the spread of sexually transmitted diseases; to name a few.

But when we realise that at the peak of wartime employment in 1943-44, there were about 32% of available women in the paid workforce; and that the women’s auxiliaries constituted about 2% of that figure (about 60,000); you have to ask yourself – OK, so what were the remaining two thirds of the female population doing during the war? What do we know about them and their wartime experiences? Well, never ask a question that you cannot answer. I’ll tell you what I believe they were doing – volunteer work, unpaid work in both the public and private spheres (what today we call ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ volunteering).

Now I am certainly not disputing that women broke barriers and set precedents, and the importance of these initiatives cannot be underestimated. But it is true that what women accomplished through their participation in volunteer work during the war was equally, if not more important, for women. But this has been largely ignored by historians. The volunteer and unpaid work carried out by women on the home front in Australia during World War II has not been seriously examined by historians due to its traditional nature and the perceived philosophical and political difficulties volunteer work presents. This has resulted in a distortion of our history and the consigning of volunteer work to the dustbin of history. And this neglect and distortion also exists for periods other than World War II – what about nineteenth century voluntary action; during the Depression of the

1930s, or generally in Australia post 1945? How do we really explain what happened in the 1990s without some historical understanding to guide us?

**To conclude.**

What constitutes our national history is selective and political. History is a powerful political tool for people to use for their own purposes. Everyone here today knows that volunteering and voluntary action plays an important part in Australian society. But it is odd that something so fundamental, something which is part and parcel of our everyday lives is not readily part of our history.

We need to interest and engage more historians to research and write on this important topic. Perhaps this is where the government and the sector can assist by providing the right environment – by funding research into the historical origins of the voluntary sector, volunteering and voluntary action in all its forms, across the decades. For in terms of describing and analysing what happens over time and why - only historians can do it. That is the role of the historian. For if the sector and governments do not know where their relationship has come from, and how it has impacted on the past, how can they understand where they are, or where they are going in the future?

\* \* \*

For further information, see Melanie Oppenheimer, *All Work No Pay. Australian Civilian Volunteers in War* (Ohio Productions, Walcha, 2002). ISBN 0 9585751 5 0 RRP \$29.95.

Distributed by Tower Books, ph. (02) 9975 5566

