

ANN MOYAL AM FRSN FAHA DLITT

1926–2019



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Ann Moyal was a gifted historian who became a central figure in the development of the history of Australian science, technology and telecommunications. In many ways, despite her distinguished achievements, Ann Moyal's career followed the standard path for professional women in the twentieth century of service and productivity without the stability of a senior, ongoing, institutional role across time. Ann Moyal marked out her working life early on as one of independence and was fortunate that this nonetheless cohered for her into a notable scholarly reputation. In many instances, Moyal deliberately chose her path as independent, rather than aligning herself with the security of singular career progression. Her particular interests and strengths included advocacy, and policy thinking. As an Honorary Fellow of the Australian Academy of Humanities, elected in 1997, she continued to argue for the importance of Humanities and Social Science research at the national policy table.

Ann Moyal was born Ann Hurley in Sydney in 1926. She graduated with a first class honours degree in history from the University of Sydney in 1947. Her first appointment was as research assistant to the University

of Sydney Vice-Chancellor, Professor Stephen Roberts, who had been her history professor. In 1949, she travelled to the University of London with a scholarship to the Institute of Historical Research. But after just one year successfully researching, Moyal moved on to a role as research assistant to Lord Beaverbrook, the Canadian-British newspaper publisher, who was involved in an ambitious project of participant history that resulted in the important publication *Men and Power* (1956), chronicling the work of British politicians in conflict with the generals over the last two years of World War 1. These years with Beaverbrook are documented in her first memoir, *Breakfast with Beaverbrook* (1995), and served, as far as I can see from the tone of recollection, to have offered a significant fillip in confidence and poise that accompanied Moyal through the rest of her professional life. In her final book, *A Woman of Influence*, (2014), she returns to his example:

The things he taught me flow through the chapters of this book – to be independent; not to take establishments and the established as seriously as they take themselves; not to be snowed by authoritative figures or 'mini-men'; and to examine and question the sources of power. From his own vivid life, he added, 'put irons in the fire', 'take risks'. And so I have made my way.

In an age when a narrow path of specialization and deep focus on outputs is demanded, the pleasure-hopping across fascinating projects that Ann Moyal achieved is deliciously rich. She returned to Australia in 1958 to work with Sir Keith Hancock on a nation-building project: appointed assistant editor of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, she worked on this foundational project for four years.

In 1962, Ann was recruited to build a bridge between the History discipline at the Australian National University and the Australian Academy of Science by establishing a special archive of informal scientific manuscripts under the Academy's dome and open up the study of Australia's scientific past. Ann pinched herself regularly for the privileges offered to her as someone untrained in science but 'immersed in the vivid world of natural history in the nineteenth century and its extending professionalism into the twentieth'.

From this period, Ann Moyal began to carve an independent career as the first professional historian of Australian science and technology. Her archive research enabled the opening up and documentation of the Australian scientific past, and she published *A Guide to the Manuscript Records of Australian Science* (1966).

There are numerous international highlights in her CV: she spent time as science editor with the University of Chicago Press, she published an influential critical paper on the Atomic Energy Commission in 1975, and helped to establish the science policy journal *Prometheus* in 1983. She was Patron of the Australian Science History Club and founder of the Colonial Science Club. Ann was awarded the AM in the Order of Australia in 1993 for her 'contribution to the history of Australian science and technology especially the writing of its history,' and the Centenary Medal of Australia for her contribution to society and the humanities in the study of Australian science.

Her three major works are the official history of Telecom, *Clear Across Australia: A History of Telecommunications* (1984), and *A Bright and Savage Land: Scientists in Colonial Australia* (1986), important works in their fields. The monograph, *Platypus: The Extraordinary Story of how a Curious Creature Baffled the World* (2001, 2010), was awarded a prize for its scientific readability by the Smithsonian Institution and is still in print in Australia and the USA.

In 1996, Ann Moyal was commissioned to curate an exhibition of portraiture celebrating the achievements of Australian scientists at Old Parliament House in Canberra. The exhibition was entitled 'The Clever Country: Scientists in Australia' and Moyal sourced portraits from across the continent to address what she described as the image problem of scientists in this society.

Ann Moyal founded and was the first President of the Independent Scholars Association of Australia from 1995 to 2000. The impetus for setting up such a formalised group was foreshadowed in her first memoir:

We have too small an intelligentsia in Australia. We have, too, an unhealthy dependence on a handful of visible pundits and discussants. We lack the vigorous intellectual criticism that can so richly characterise British, French and American public life. I believe the time is ripe to consider an *Academy of Independent Scholars* in Australia ...for the assembling of distinguished and promising independent thinkers who, working outside institutions and the established academies, can offer an open and diverse critique. To raise the profile of independent scholars in Australia and increase awareness of their diversity and expertise; to

facilitate the wide contribution of independent scholars to the public sphere; and to provide community and contact for scholars, who, for the most part, conduct their work in circumstances of some isolation. Later we would add 'to give a voice to dissent'.

Gender inequities continued to distract Ann Moyal throughout her life. The paradoxes of mobility and seniority were a constant, probably exacerbated by her own freewheeling status as she moved across organisations, institutions, and pursuits with rapidity. As well, the lack of confidence that women lived with and the blindness of many men to the existence of a gender gap tied into most of her priorities in advocacy roles.

Ann Moyal was a pragmatic woman but it is clear from her writings that she allowed an openness about emotional colour in her life: she was candid about love and loss and she remained passionate throughout her life, allowing intensity in the way she conducted relationships. She had been married three times, and commenced an intimate relationship between the ages of 70 and 80. She writes about these intimacies with a delicacy and frankness I've rarely encountered in the mode of memoir she wrote, and matched with the drive to produce intellectual work provides a portrait of a fulfilling life. Ann Moyal's writing is compelling in these books, full of a highly trained observing eye and attention to a pleasing prose style.

In 2014 I published the last book by historian Geoffrey Bolton, a biography of Sir Paul Hasluck, and we launched it at University House in Canberra. Ann Moyal attended. She was late arriving as she had travelled from Melbourne after the previous evening's Prime Minister's Literary Award ceremony. This was the year that the Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, had used his discretionary powers to alter the judge's decisions. Ann was a judge in the Australian History Award and was incandescent with rage at the absence of forewarning at the ceremony—as well as humiliation at the deeply partisan Captain's Picks that she could not support. She had spent the day doing media about this and I was impressed that she still had the energy and courtesy to attend an early evening event. That was the only time we met in person after many months of very pleasurable telephone and email correspondence.

When I accepted Ann Moyal's final book for publication at UWA Publishing in 2013, it was the first time I had signed an author who lived in an aged care facility, albeit with good mobility and a continuing lust for life. The book, her second volume of memoir, came with a pugnacious title: *A Woman of Influence: Science, Men & History*. A prominent bookseller called me to urge a change of title, deeming it too awkwardly self-interested to be seemly. I defended the author and stuck with her

title. Having read her account of a full life, written at 88 years of age, I couldn't argue against the claim of the title. She was thrilled with the finished object with a gorgeous portrait of her younger self on the cover. The book's epigraph came from fiction, Michael Ondaatje's 2007 novel, *Divisadero*:

Everything is biographical. There is a hidden presence of others in us, even those we have known briefly. We contain them for the rest of our lives.

Ann had never completed a higher degree; interesting employment always trumped academic qualifications. She presented her collected book publications to the Australian National University for consideration for a higher degree, and was greatly honoured in 2003 to be awarded the degree of Doctor of Letters. Four years later, the University of Sydney presented her with an

honorary DLitt 60 years after graduation in History in 1947. Ann Moyal was never comfortable with hierarchies and, until she made the choice to occupy an independent intellectual space, had experienced some friction in institutions. A desk at the Petherick Room at the National Library of Australia became a working site for more than 20 years of her career.

Ann Moyal died in Canberra, the *bush capital* she had loved for 60 years and lived in for longer than any other place. The example she offered in following her interests and passions rather than a career path is likely much harder to achieve in these economically rationalist times in universities and intellectual lives, but it is worth keeping in one's imagination for the rich seam it provides.

TERRI-ANN WHITE FAHA

Quotations contained here are all from *A Woman of Influence: Science, Men & History* (UWA Publishing, 2014).