

# *New Windows on a Woman's World:*

## *Essays for Jocelyn Harris*

*edited by*

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The title of the two volumes forming this Festschrift in honour of Professor Jocelyn Harris is deliberately ambiguous. *New Windows on a Woman's World* might suggest that what is offered here is a sweeping view over the surrounding countryside—as if from the upper storey of a grand country house dating, perhaps, from the eighteenth century—surveying the many-sided life of women as scholars and creative artists.

Certainly, women figure within these pages as scholarly writers, critics, and historians demonstrating their craft as they examine the lives and works of other women, both their contemporaries and their ancestors. Women figure here, too, as poets, dramatists, novelists, short story writers, and writers of memoirs and life narratives; as diarists, essayists, and journal keepers, guardians of the past and creative innovators, makers of a new artistic heritage. They figure as actresses, film-makers, and painters, social observers and commentators; as customers and subscribers; as governesses, heiresses, wives, mothers, mistresses, daughters and nieces, feminists and conservatives, dashing individuals and insignificant servants, social and cultural organisers, teachers and students—even as national icons. Significantly, they figure both as sharp-eyed, retentive readers of fiction and other creative work, and (as artists in their own right) as shrewd examiners of the work of their antecedents, both male and female.

Their clear-sighted gaze, confidently traversing their own world, naturally takes the measure of a number of its prominent male occupants—authors and others, from King Alfred, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Defoe, Richardson, Pope, Blair, Reynolds, Byron, and Leslie Stephen to Kazuo Ishiguro and J. M. Coetzee—a critical task shared by the male critics, historians, and scholars represented here. They are conscious, too, of the intellectual and cultural currents which form the larger context for the arts in every age, from the history of medical practices, the impact of industrialization and the techniques of social control, networks of patronage and publication practices, theological ideologies,

ideas of ethics and morality, changes in stage fashion and critical approaches to literature, codifications of conduct for women, theories of representation, social mores, the evolution of literary forms and rhetorical conventions, to the literary archaeology of female identity, the politics of revolution, control, and repression, and the aftermath of what Alistair Fox calls the “sexual revolution.”

But the title, *New Windows on a Woman's World*, is susceptible of another reading: a reading that focusses on the remarkable span of activities and interests that characterises the person to whom this publication is dedicated, Professor Jocelyn Harris. Here is a life which deserves the accolade given to Chaucer's writing by John Dryden. Here, indeed, is God's plenty; one woman's world, rich in delights and domains, a civilised, cultured world that ranges from the domestic to the realms of high art, a world of connections and networks laced through with warm personal links and friendships, as well as more objective scholarly and critical commonalities. So strong is this element in Jocelyn Harris's character and professional academic work, that the editors have decided to place one of several personal memoirs submitted by friends (the others read out as tributes at the formal occasion celebrating and honouring her retirement) at the end of the introduction.

The first volume of this collection properly begins with essays focussed on Samuel Richardson, whose massive novels Jocelyn has taught brilliantly and creatively to generations of students, and whose cultivated mind Jocelyn has opened out to scholars and critics. Richardson is followed by a shoal of other eighteenth-century writers, scholars, artists, and others, many of them women as subjects of contemporary scholarship, critical discussion, and exposition conducted, in turn, by women. This is wholly appropriate, for Jocelyn Harris, throughout her long and distinguished academic career, has not only modelled the equal achievements possible for women in a largely male-dominated world; she has also constantly encouraged other women staff (academic and administrative) to fulfil their potential, and fearlessly given voice to a female perspective on the world of academia.

The second volume of this collection more variously still displays and recognises the breadth of her interests. It begins, as it must, with essays by fellow scholars and critics writing on Jane Austen: appropriately, the first essay, by Julia Prewitt Brown, is titled “Taking Off from *The Art of Memory*,” for it was Jocelyn's ground-breaking analysis of Austen's debt to Richardson in her *Jane Austen and the Art of Memory* that unequivocally established her standing as a scholar of international reputation, as it is the detailed analysis of Austen's keen historical and political sensitivities which forms the subject of her latest, yet to be published academic book, and crowns her vision of an author who displays Jocelyn's own sense of the interconnectedness of things; of creative writing as transformative history or, more simply, as an endless conversation among its finest practitioners.

The next section of the volume is properly given to international writing about and by women, from the life stories of Australian aboriginal women to British and American women's fictional accounts of their own cultures, from female stereotypes and ideals to historical and contemporary women's cultural and personal experiences. This is followed by a group of essays devoted to New Zealand writers and artists—yet again appropriately, for a person who at the beginning almost single-handedly fought for and established a place for the academic study of women's writing and, in particular,

contemporary New Zealand women's writing within the full spectrum of studies in "English" literature offered at the University of Otago.

Jocelyn's general delight in art and the achievements of artists of every kind is recognised in a group of writings gathered under the title "Creative Writing in Honour of Jocelyn Harris." What may not be known by readers other than New Zealanders is that there is new representative work published here by all but one of the Poet Laureates of this country to date.

The volume closes with a set of scholarly essays submitted by friends and colleagues as tributes to Jocelyn Harris's own reputation as an international scholar. They reflect the changing face of "English" as a discipline at Otago in the course of Professor Harris's long career here, as the department travelled from its location in a fine old house (now displaced by a modern student hostel), to a wing overlooking the courtyard of the university's Central Library building (now displaced by a spacious modern construction), to its present location in a dedicated Arts building (where it displaced the Department of Education). Here, the Old English *Boethius* and the *Exeter Book* rub shoulders with Shakespeare and Byron. The Japanese writer Ishiguro and the South African J. M. Coetzee meet each other and share a space with Victorian women members of the Dunedin Shakespeare Club, united in the "conscientious discharge of their duties."

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