

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."

Contents

Volume One

Preface

Elspeth Sandys. Jocelyn Harris.

Samuel Richardson

Margaret Anne Doody. Hidden Histories of Decline: Autopsy, George II's Heart Attack, and the Dying Condition in *Clarissa* and *Tristram Shandy*.

John A. Dussinger. The Negotiations of Sir Charles Grandison.

Robert Hannah. Calendar Styles in Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison*.

Tom Keymer. Lady Echlin: Richardson's Window on Eighteenth-Century Ireland.

Keith Maslen. Resurrecting Samuel Richardson.

Lisa Zunshine. Can We Teach the "Deep Intersubjectivity" of Richardson's *Clarissa*?

Eighteenth-Century Writers

Janine Barchas. "Kits, cats, sacks, and wives": The Female Multitude on Robinson Crusoe's Island.

Brian Corman. Clara Reeve's *The Progress of Romance* and the Canon of the Novel in 1785.

John Drummond. Frances Brooke's *Rosina*: A Lesson in Morality.

Penny Gay. What Happened to Hannah Cowley?

John Hardy. The Wit to Realise Dulness.
 Elizabeth Hogbin and Jae Jung Song. Patterns of Relativisation in Eighteenth- and Twentieth-Century Written English Narrative: A Functional-Typological Perspective.
 Juliet McMaster. The Suicide Scene in *Cecilia*: Frances Burney and the Realistic Gothic.
 Felicity Nussbaum. "More than a Woman": Early Memoirs of British Actresses.
 Ruth Perry. Deserted Villages, Kindly Landlords, and Overdetermined Marriages in Eighteenth-Century England.
 Clive Probyn. Referencing the Real: Hugh Blair, Joshua Reynolds, Samuel Johnson, and the Limits of Representation.
 Pat Rogers. The Memory of Henrietta Tempest: Pope's "Winter" and the Great Storm.
 Shef Rogers. Alternatives to the Novel: Romance, Alchemy, and *The Travels and Adventures of Edward Brown, Esq.* (1739).
 Peter Sabor. "A kind of Tax on the Public": The Subscription List to Frances Burney's *Camilla*.
 George Starr. Defoe and Biblical Memory.
 Paul Tankard. Johnson and the Hot Potato: Scholarship and the "Science of Fables."
 Greg Waite. The Saxon Nymph and Her Illustrious Women: Elizabeth Elstob's Notebook (Oxford Bodleian Library Manuscript Ballard 64).

Volume Two

Jane Austen

Julia Prewitt Brown. Taking Off from *The Art of Memory*.
 Patricia Brückmann. "Such days as these:" Books, Readers, and Libraries in *Persuasion*.
 Nicola Cummins. Affectionate, Indulgent, Dyslexic? Reassessing Mr. Woodhouse.
 Jan Fergus. The Comedy of Gendered Whining in *Persuasion* and *Emma*.
 Vivien Jones. Austen's Nieces: Case Studies in Women and Writing.
 David Monaghan. "A cheerful confidence in futurity": The Movement Motif in Austen's Novel and Dear/Michell's Film Adaptation of *Persuasion*.
 Albert J. Rivero. Doubling Eliza: Austen's Remembrance of Richardson (and perhaps Haywood) in *Sense and Sensibility*.
 Bruce Stovel. The New Emma in *Emma*.
 Kathryn Sutherland. Why Jane Austen is not Charlotte Brontë.
 Laura Vorachek. Intertextuality and Ideology: Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women*.
 John Wiltshire. The Importance of Being Edmund: On Names in *Mansfield Park*.
 Carol Wyvill. Sauce for the Gander: Gender and Morality in Three Jane Austen Novels.

International Writing by and about Women

Barbara Brookes and Dorothy Page. The Red-Headed Heroine.
 Joost Daalder. Frustrated Emancipation in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*.
 Alistair Fox. Feminine "Neoneeds" and Masculine Brutality after the Sexual Revolution: Melissa P's *One Hundred Strokes of the Brush before Bed*.
 Alyth F. Grant. Lou Andreas-Salomé and Her Vision of the Feminine.

Ingrid Gunby. "There is no ghost in this house:" Home and History in Elizabeth Bowen.
Alan Horsman. "A bite medicinally": Leslie Stephen and Virginia Woolf's Eighteenth-Century Essays.
Devoney Looser. Another Jane: Jane Porter, Austen's Contemporary.
Lisa Marr. *All Dressed in Green: A Woman's Account of the 1798 Rebellion*.
Russell Poole. Seeing "a little more of the world" (and not being able to change it) in *Agnes Grey*.
Chris Prentice. From Liminality to Reconciliation: The Politics of Aboriginal Women's Life-Narratives.
Joanne Wilkes. "Clever Women": Anne Mozley, Jane Austen, and Charlotte Brontë.

New Zealand Writers and Artists

Roger Collins. Intersecting Lives and Intertwining Works: Owen Merton and Evelyn Scott.
Richard Corballis. Zealandia among the Poets: A Sesquicentennial Tribute.
Mark Houlahan. Plucking the Flower, Safety: William Shakespeare and Katherine Mansfield.
Lawrence Jones. Three "Bush" Novels and the Colonial Myth.
Jenny Lawn. The Word as Remnant: Margaret Atwood and Janet Frame.
Rochelle Simmons. The Postmodern *Piano*.
Anna Smith. Spelling the Sensuous: The Art of Jude Rae.
Janet Wilson. Suffering and Survival: Body and Voice in Recent Maori Writing.

Creative Writing in Honour of Jocelyn Harris

Colin Gibson. A Blessing.
Bernadette Hall. Trilogy: Be Still and Know.
Bill Manhire. The Writer.
beith moon. Sista!
James Norcliffe. Kant's dove.
Elizabeth Smither. The Year of Adverbs.
Brian Turner. Five Poems.
Alison Wong. there's always things to come back to the kitchen for.

Scholarly Writing in Honour of Jocelyn Harris

Chris Ackerley. "What precisely is this 'greatness'?" Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and the Well-made Play.
John Hale. Shakespeare's Shoot-outs, with a Comparison between *King Lear* and *Hamlet*.
Susan Irvine. Rewriting Women in the Old English *Boethius*.
Mel Kersey. Inherited Forms and the Burden of Time in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.
Michael Neill. "The Language of the Heart": Confession, Metaphor, and Grace in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*.
Paul Sorrell. A Bee in My Bonnet: Solving Riddle 17 of the Exeter Book.
Evelyn Tribble. The "conscientious discharge of their duties": Women in the Dunedin Shakespeare Club, 1877-1898.

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