

# You Daughters of Freedom

*The Australians who won the vote  
and inspired the world*

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## INTRODUCTION

# The Big Picture

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A banner is a thing to float in the wind, to flicker in the breeze,  
to flirt its colours for your pleasure, to half-show and half-conceal,  
a device you long to unravel; you do not want to read it,  
you want to worship it.

MARY LOWNDES  
*On Banners and Banner-making, 1909*

If you're ever in Canberra, Australia's national capital, whether for the first time or the one millionth, it's worth a visit to Parliament House. The walls have stories to tell.

As you walk from Queen's Terrace towards the House of Representatives, you pass the Great Hall to your right. The Great Hall, as its name suggests, is vast, its native timber panelling both warm and sleek—the ambitious veneer of home-grown, post-colonial representation. The Great Hall must be impressive when filled to the gunnels with pollies and punters on feast days like the annual Parliamentary Midwinter Ball, but whenever I've been to Parliament House it's been empty save for huddled groups of Chinese and Indian tourists pointing iPhones in every direction. But I like to pop my head in nonetheless, if only because the Great Hall houses a stunningly beautiful tapestry, conceived by artist Arthur Boyd. According to the parliamentary website, the artwork was executed by

the Victorian Tapestry Workshop and designed to bring ‘the essence of the Australian landscape’ into the heart of Australia’s political life.<sup>1</sup> The tapestry took fourteen full-time weavers over two years to complete.

On another wall in the Great Hall hangs a sixteen-metre-long embroidery, designed by artist Kay Lawrence and wrought by ‘500 highly skilled women’ from all of the Australian state and territory embroidery guilds...‘a logistical challenge that would foster teamwork between women across the country’. The embroidery tells the story of human settlement in Australia, from pre-European times to 1900.<sup>2</sup> Both artworks were commissioned for the opening of the new Parliament House in May 1988. The Great Hall is a fitting place to start any female-centric tour of Australian democracy. Crafting the story of the nation has always been women’s work—on the ground, if rarely in history’s written page.

Walk further into the Members’ Hall—the centre of Parliament House, directly under the flag mast—and you’ll be greeted by a welcoming committee of framed portraits of Australia’s past prime ministers. Move along the row and watch the sombre frockcoats and bushy moustaches give way to sombre suits and ties and clean-shaven chins.<sup>3</sup> There are also portraits of governors-general in the Members’ Hall gallery and one of the G-G’s boss, Australia’s head of state, Queen Elizabeth II, painted in London in 1954 by William Dargie. The portraits constitute part of the Historic Memorials Collection, founded in 1911 by Prime Minister Andrew Fisher.

Only two of the faces in the Members’ Hall belong to women: Australia’s first female governor-general, Quentin Bryce (2008–14) and Australia’s reigning sovereign, Queen Elizabeth II (1952–). Australia’s first and, to date, only female prime minister, Julia Gillard (2010–13), has yet to be immortalised in oils.

Plonked in the middle of the Members’ Hall, directly across from the portrait of the Queen, resplendent in her bright yellow ‘wattle dress’, is a display cabinet. Here, safely housed under glass,

are the 1963 Yirrkala bark petitions. According to the website [foundingdocs.com.au](http://foundingdocs.com.au), these small but precious items—part traditional Indigenous artwork, part Westminster-style petition—are the ‘first documents bridging Commonwealth law as it then stood, and the Indigenous laws of the land’.<sup>4</sup> Queen Elizabeth watches over the material legacy of the colonial project her royal ancestors commenced in 1788.

Proceed now through a narrow corridor, beyond the House of Representatives and the Senate, and you’ll reach the Main Committee Room. Here the wall is adorned with Tom Roberts’ ‘Big Picture’, officially known as *The Opening of the First Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia by His Royal Highness the Duke of Cornwall and York, 9 May 1901*. Hence the shorthand: the Big Picture. The Big Picture, like the Great Hall, is immense. Unlike the hall, the painting is permanently peopled. A multitude of Edwardian VIPs stand frozen in the moment of parliamentary initiation. The famous painting, which depicts the first sitting of the new Federal Parliament (in the Exhibition Building in Melbourne, because in 1901 Canberra was a sheep run, not a city) is on permanent loan from the Royal Collection. It’s not easy to own your own history.<sup>5</sup>

As you rounded the corner into the narrow corridor, veering left at the Wattle Queen (or right at Dame Quentin), you might have noticed another glass display case. The item in it is 2.5 metres high and 1.4 metres wide. Apart from its impressive dimensions, the object is also strikingly beautiful. All greens, flowing white and flashes of red. But the tucked-away positioning, not visible from the main hall, suggests that you needn’t dally en route to the Big Picture.

If you do stop here, however, you’ll find a national treasure: an object that art historian Myra Scott has called ‘a triumphant celebration of Australia’s leadership in political reform’; an object representing ‘the first time in England that art had been co-opted for a mass people’s movement, with cultural and ideological issues, for political ends’.<sup>6</sup>

Like the bark petitions, which used art to bridge a gulf between two systems of law—one sovereign, one imperial—this object, according to Scott, ‘redefined the issue from one of internal politics...to one of statesmanship and discussion between two countries...a symbolic appeal from one government to another at a level of international diplomacy’.

The issue? Women’s suffrage. The countries? England and Australia. The statesmen? Australian women.



This object you are standing before was made by Australian artist Dora Meeson Coates while she was living in London in the summer of 1908. It is a banner, a huge banner, a women’s suffrage banner, one she designed and painted *for the Commonwealth*, as she later explained, and carried in the internationally renowned Women’s Coronation Procession of 1911. Organised by Britain’s suffragettes—militant campaigners for votes for women—and held on the eve of King George V’s coronation in the sweltering summer of 1911, this monster march was hailed as *the greatest procession ever known in the world’s history*.<sup>7</sup> Of the one thousand banners that were carried that day down London’s streets by forty thousand defiant women, Meeson Coates’ was exceptional.

Banners made for the great pre-war suffragette rallies were generally embroidered. But this one was painted, oil on hessian. It was also uncommonly large, requiring four people to keep it upright in the five-hour parade. But it was the banner’s message, and its controversial meaning, that attracted the world’s attention. The imagery was drawn from the classical style that was the fashion of the day. Mother Britannia, draped in a white gown, holding her sceptre, hip and head cocked, staring into the middle distance. Daughter Minerva, bearing the heraldry of Australia’s recently federated states on her shield, leaning forward, reaching out, palm

upturned, beseeching but also offering advice. Her counsel? *Trust the Women Mother As I Have Done*. Not a footnote but a banner headline, etched in upright capital letters above the women's heads. Take my hand, Mother, follow me.

Paraded before an international audience, it was a banner replete with allegorical effrontery, signifying what all the world knew: Australia was the nation that had *pioneered [women] into citizenship*, as contemporary American journalist Jessie Ackermann readily acknowledged.<sup>8</sup> *The purest type of democracy the human race has ever known*, wrote another reporter in 1903, *flourishes to-day beneath Australian skies*. It was in recognition of this remarkable fact—that the daughters of empire had outpaced the mother country in winning their political sovereignty—that Dora Meeson Coates had fashioned her suffrage banner, behind which a proud Australian contingent would march in support of her unenfranchised sisters.

Unlike Tom Roberts' Big Picture—the implied centrepiece of Australia's democratic history at Parliament House—Meeson Coates' banner is owned by the Australian people. After languishing in obscurity, unceremoniously folded and gathering dust atop a cupboard in a storeroom in London for most of the twentieth century, it was purchased by the Australian government as a bicentennial gift to 'the women of Australia'. *Women's Banner is Coming Home*, declared a Canberra newspaper, though no boomerang effect was in play. Dora Meeson Coates had created the banner in her Chelsea studio, and on British soil it had to that date remained.<sup>9</sup> Due to the ardent campaigning of a few female MPs, Senator Margaret Reynolds in particular, the banner was 'handed over' by Prime Minister Bob Hawke at an upbeat ceremony on International Women's Day, 1988. Damaged by decades of neglect, the banner was then sent off for conservation work and again forsaken. A fat folder of bureaucratic paperwork in the National Archives of Australia reveals the sorry tale of how Meeson Coates' banner travelled from her Chelsea studio to a roundabout corridor in Canberra.

Owned by the Australian people. Purchased for the Australian people. Representing the world-leading achievements of the Australian people. Yet almost completely unknown to the vast majority of Australian people.

When, in mid-2017, I asked the custodians of Parliament House's art collection for information on the object's provenance, they knew little beyond the bare facts of its purchase and return.<sup>10</sup> In the thirty years since it 'came home', the banner had become untethered from its remarkable story.

Half-shown and half-concealed. A device you long to unravel.



I first became aware of Dora Meeson Coates' banner in August 2014. I was in Canberra for the preview screening of a documentary series I had worked on, held at the cinema in Parliament House. Later, tipsy on free champagne and applause, I took a wander around the building. When I stumbled upon the banner I was transfixed, both by its beauty as an artwork and by the remarkable fact that I'd never known of its existence—despite the fact that my first foray into television was a documentary called *Utopia Girls*, broadcast on the ABC in 2012, about how Australian women won the vote.

Did I *really* not know about this incredible object taking up valuable real estate in the big house of Australian democracy? Or had I just misplaced the memory?

Either way, I was ashamed of myself. Bad feminist.

A year later, I found myself in another cinema. The occasion was the Melbourne premiere of the Hollywood feature film *Suffragette*. The film portrayed the political awakening of a working-class woman whose life changes forever when she joins Emmeline Pankhurst's Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) and becomes a militant campaigner for votes for women. Emmeline,

played by Meryl Streep, is the goodie; Prime Minister Asquith is the baddie. The working woman at the centre of the story is loosely based on suffragette Annie Kenney, but is really an Everywoman, whose hero's journey takes her from somnolent drudge to politically awakened, window-smashing, speech-giving freedom fighter. I was invited to speak on a post-screening panel, and asked by the organisers to answer any historical questions the audience might have about the British suffrage campaign.

If you ask most Australians what they know of the British suffragette movement, the charismatic Pankhurst women might figure. Bombs in letterboxes, force-feeding and a lady who threw herself in front of a racehorse. The film would join the dots in fictionalised form, and I could temper the artistic licence with some facts.

But I had mistakenly assumed that Australian women (the audience was almost exclusively women) already knew their own history. I soon found myself giving a mini-lecture on the winning of women's suffrage in Australia, on Australia's pre-eminence in the world movement and the significance of Australian women as role models to, and leaders within, the British suffrage campaign depicted in the film.

Australia's participation in the British campaign was not only unrepresented in the movie, but also practically unknown in Australia—the parameters of mainstream knowledge about Australia's role in big world events confined to war and sport. What about politics? And in particular, what about the activism and statesmanship of women?

It's not so surprising that *Suffragette*—a Hollywood movie about a moment in British history—did not have much to say about Australian women's role. (The film was widely criticised for its failure to depict women of colour, but not its omission of the antipodean angle.) What was more alarming to me was how little Australian audiences knew of their foremothers' part in making that history.



But they wanted to know. I discovered that night an appetite for our own history—a hunger even—that this book sets out both to whet and to satisfy.

Academics might know the names of the Australians who walked onto the world stage as leading ladies, not bit parts, but these women are not part of a broader, mainstream historical consciousness. They are not depicted on our own television and movie screens, not popularised as icons in advertising and tourism campaigns, not subsidised by government-sponsored tourist trails.<sup>11</sup>

Imagine a pilgrimage to London, to Westminster, to view the spot where Muriel Matters, known globally as *that daring Australian girl*, became the first woman to speak in the British Parliament. Her words, before being dragged off to prison: *Votes for Women!*

Or to Hyde Park, to re-enact the day in 1908 when half a million people gathered to listen to suffragette leaders preach the gospel of women's enfranchisement. On one of the stages stood an Australian woman, Nellie Martel, proudly proclaiming that she was the only speaker there who had the right to vote, the right that all others coveted.

Or a trip to Hammersmith, to the spot where Dora Montefiore—the woman who established the first suffrage society in New South Wales in 1891—was later holed up in a siege after refusing to pay her British taxes until she won the same right to the franchise that she held in Sydney.

Or to an overflowing Albert Hall, where Vida Goldstein *electrified the house* with her tales of what Australian women had done with their citizenship rights and why British women needed to maintain their rage in the fight for their own rights and freedoms.

Entitlements that were cheekily trumpeted by a huge banner painted by an Australian woman and carried by Australian women in a procession that would be reported around the world.

The story of British women's struggle for suffrage cannot be written too many times. In 2018, the centenary year of (some)

British women getting the (partial) vote, a slew of new books will be published, exhibitions held and honorary marches staged. It is a monumental story containing all the elements of a blockbuster: heroes and villains, oppressors and the oppressed, charismatic leaders, violent conflict, blood sacrifice and, eventually, a victory for truth, justice and the liberal way. But Australia's part in that epic drama needs to be told for the first time.

That a *baby nation* (as Vida called Australia) played more than a crawl-on role in this story of mass democratic protest makes its telling all the more exhilarating.

At the turn of the twentieth century, women's suffrage was described as *the great world movement...the most insistent political problem of the day*.<sup>12</sup> How to understand what could motivate women to take to the streets—against social norms of propriety, facing vilification from the press, imprisonment and physical violence from police and bystanders alike—to claim their piece of the democratic pie? How to understand why Australian women would feel compelled to travel the great distance to continue the fight in Great Britain, when their own long battle was finally won at home? Were they masochists or altruists? Attention-seekers or do-gooders? It's hard to grasp now—when the very concept of democracy is under attack—why they cared so much about democratic citizenship rights.

A Lowy Institute survey in 2017 found that only sixty per cent of Australians believed that democracy was the best system of government. Thirty-three per cent of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds responded that in some circumstances, a non-democratic form of government can be preferable.<sup>13</sup> Research in other western nations reveals a similar level of disenchantment, particularly among young people.<sup>14</sup> Voter dissatisfaction appears to be highest in the United States—the spiritual home of modern democracy—where nine out of ten Americans no longer have faith in their political system.<sup>15</sup> And that was before President Donald Trump was elected.

Given the present state of disillusionment with democracy, it

is important to remember that people once cared so very much about defending it, sharing in it and exercising their right to it.



They say the past is a foreign country. One aspect of first wave feminism that seems particularly strange to modern sensibilities is the tacit notion that women's enfranchisement would lead to the political and social purification of the world, due to women's innate moral and spiritual superiority. In her 1896 essay 'Why Women Need Woman Suffrage; and Why We Need It Now', Dora Montefiore argued that women have *a power for self sacrifice, a power of perceiving with the eye of intuition and of faith...that hidden spiritual power in her sex*. Because a woman's soul had been *sufficiently purified*, women were needed to *instil fresh life into the dead body of politics*.<sup>16</sup> The idea that women were better than men because they were innately 'pure', less inclined to bad habits, was hardwired into generations of women raised in the Victorian era.<sup>17</sup>

Today's generation of democrats, whether rusted on or tenuously attached, are less likely to hold that women having citizenship rights will inexorably lead to social or political purity, let alone global peace. To a twenty-first-century mindset, the first wave feminists' focus on vice, on 'evils' such as drinking, gambling and sexual licentiousness, can seem like killjoy prudery.

But in the early-twentieth-century context, measures such as raising the age of consent and ending the sexual double standard represented a radical attempt to redefine women's bodies as sites of power every bit as contested as the ballot box. Self-government in the public sphere (the vote) was intended to be mirrored in the so-called private sphere (the body). Campaigns for sexual sovereignty were just as threatening to the established order as today's movement for Indigenous sovereignty (a treaty) is to conservative Australian governments.

Feminists pursued a new national and global social order based on mutual care and protection, equality of rights and responsibilities and freedom from sexual, economic and political oppression. They may have looked like wowzers in their bonnets and button-up gowns, but they were actually warriors.

We need to understand what mattered to women in the past—not what we think now should have mattered to them, or not mattered to them quite so much—and how women sought and achieved the legal, civil and social reforms *they* thought were necessary at the time.

In the two decades preceding World War I, women's suffrage was perceived to usher in a new dawn in the history of humanity. Its dominance as the cause célèbre of the era was acknowledged by leading thinkers of the age. Like a pop star, it only needed one name. It was the Cause.

*The suffrage crusade*, wrote British journalist Alfred Gardiner in 1913, *is the most significant revolution that has come over society in the first years of the 20th century...not political but elemental...the formal embodiment of a spiritual renaissance*.<sup>18</sup> The cause stood for rebellion, emancipation, spiritual renewal and a fundamental change in the sexual, political and industrial structure of society. *Its insurgence is worldwide*, wrote Gardiner, *for this reason I think the woman suffrage crusade will, in the eyes of the historian, overshadow all the other events of these tumultuous times*.<sup>19</sup> The cause focused its tactical energies on one solution to the problem of gendered inequality and oppression: the vote.

Because Australia was the first—and for many years the only—country to have national parliamentary suffrage, Australia became the focus of the world's attention. *Students of social questions, professors and pupils came to Australia*, wrote Jessie Ackermann in 1913, *until in time Australia became the Mecca for observation concerning up-to-date legislation in the interest of all the people—the whole of the people*.<sup>20</sup> New Zealand was in the spotlight too, but New Zealand was not a

nation-state; she had not placed adult suffrage as a cornerstone of her constitution. Australia was the poison taster of the world: in the *noonday glare*, as Ackermann put it.

As a nation, Australia played a leading part in the cause as inspiration, model and innovator. As individual Australians, many women played leading parts as activists, agitators, intellectuals and educators. Ackermann observed that *the freest girls in the world* were to be found in Australia; *girls who could make a mark upon the age in which they lived*. The task ahead was to abolish demoralising old-time, old-world usages and establish new ones more in keeping with the spirit of freedom and progress. This was the promise of the twentieth century. Ackermann was convinced that *the world's greatest reforms must be brought about by girls, and Australia is the natural starting point...where they enjoy the advantages of citizenship*.<sup>21</sup>

This history of idealism and experimentation has largely been lost to popular memory, overshadowed by the cataclysm of World War I. A new dawn of political, industrial and social awakening was replaced, all too quickly, by the darkness of death and grief.

There has not only been a loss to world history of Australia's role in the great story of the age. There has also been a loss to Australian history of our national self-consciousness as a country of leaders, thinkers and innovators. We have become accustomed to seeing ourselves as country cousins in the world's political affairs: signatories, allies and partners, but not movers and shakers; not agenda-setters. What's worse, except on the sporting field, we expect little of ourselves. *Australia bids for Global Village Idiot status once more*, reads a 2017 headline in CRIKEY.<sup>22</sup> The content of the article is about cyber-security, but the headline plays off an assumption of Australia's inadequacy, regardless of the issue. When I was a kid, at least we were proud we'd invented the black box recorder and the goon bag. Now we're not so sure what we've got to contribute.

Australians at the birth of a new nation and the dawn of a new century did not expect it to be so. In 1902, while debating

the Commonwealth Franchise Act that would forever shatter the legislative framework of national governments towards their citizens by making women the political equals of men, Queensland senator Thomas Glassey made this bold prediction:

I believe that when the history of the first Parliament of the Commonwealth comes to be written, the conferring of this immense boon upon so many people, not as a privilege, but on the grounds of justice and equity, will receive the commendation of the historian.<sup>23</sup>

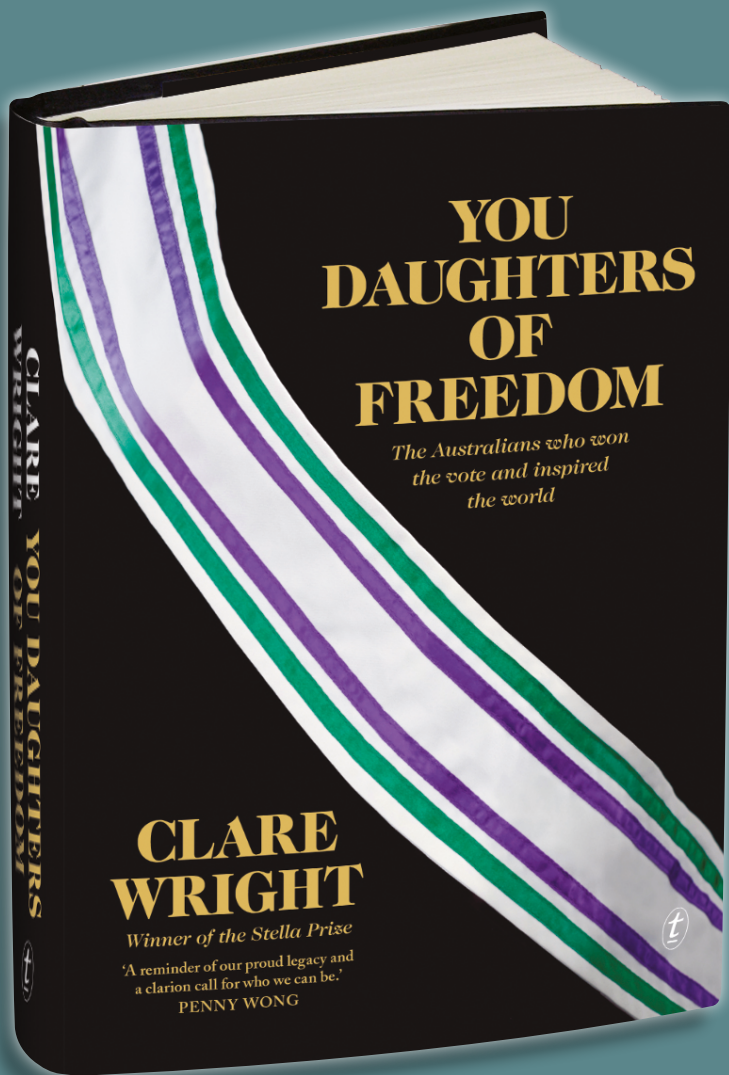
Instead, the unique achievement became an academic annotation rather than the clarion call of a young and proud nation.

Today, we've largely forgotten that at the turn of the twentieth century, Australia was famed for its reformist drive and progressive agenda. Our inventions and start-ups were in democratic legislation, welfare reforms, industrial arbitration and other experiments (including immigration restriction based on racial exclusion) brewed up in the social laboratory. And women were often both the entrepreneurs *and* the door-to-door salesmen, roaming from country to country spruiking Australia's wares. Australian women were not only nationalising, but also globalising, actors—with the energy, skill, courage and ambition to change the world.

This history, too, is part of the Big Picture.

This is the story of how the world's newest nation became a global exemplar, exporting to the world a model of democracy that was, at once, ahead of its time and perfectly of the moment.

This is the story that Dora Meeson Coates' impudent banner promises to reveal, if only its matted threads can be unravelled.



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