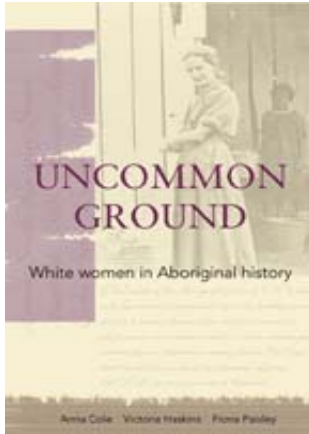


Uncommon ground: White women in Aboriginal history edited by Anna Cole, Victoria Haskins & Fiona Paisley. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2005, pp. 279, A\$34.95, paperback, ISBN: 0855754850.



This collection of biographical essays makes compelling reading. The subject matter is unusual, and despite our possible familiarity with some of the women featured, the clear-eyed analysis of the editors and their contributors offers a fresh perspective on their lives and motivation, within the context of Aboriginal colonial history. Even those essays which are informed by the self-reflexive involvement of the authors retain a striking measure of objectivity. The book is divided into four thematic parts, and the women included in each section range from missionary workers and administrators to activists and artists.

The first section, 'The Home Front', presents the home as institution, as well as domestic refuge. The writing in this section includes women, who, in their attempts to improve the lives of the Aborigines in their care, were hampered not only by the inflexibility of government, church and social systems, but also inevitably, by their own cultural or religious beliefs. The account of Joan Kingsley-Strack's activism, motivated by her own experience of employing Aboriginal servants, is written with compassion and honesty by her great-granddaughter. Her story vividly demonstrates Strack's own eventual disillusionment and withdrawal from active protest, as life and the system overwhelmed her. Her personal sense of failure is very apparent, as is the desperation of those who had come to depend on her, made urgent through extracts from their letters.

'Shared Struggle', the second part of the collection, explores the collaboration between black and white women during the twentieth century, and includes the prominent Aboriginal activist Pearl Gibbs, who worked tirelessly with white feminists and reformers for Aboriginal rights. This is followed by 'Public Lives' which examines the work of women who engaged to varying degrees with the iniquitous laws which removed children from their families, ruining Aboriginal women's lives, and with repercussions which continue to reverberate within Indigenous communities. The final section "'Knowing" the Aborigines' features the problematic attitudes and actions of Daisy Bates and Elizabeth Durack, as well as the more benign influence of Catherine Martin.

Reading these essays one becomes very aware of the struggle of these women against the patriarchal hierarchy within their own colonial society, as well as their work in harsh and unfamiliar environmental conditions, frequently with limited resources or expertise. They all made considerable social and or physical sacrifices, and confronted uncomfortable cultural and political issues in order to pursue their extraordinary lives. The essays consistently demonstrate a sympathetic objectivity, yet the Aboriginal women themselves remain, perhaps deliberately, an enigmatic presence in many of these narratives, with the obvious exception of Pearl Gibbs, and Mary, Kingsley-Strack's unfortunate maid. Despite this elusiveness, the most significant achievement in this

collection of stories, and it is considerable, is the quiet revelation of the complex nature of the intertwining lives of Aboriginal and white women throughout the experience of colonization.

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