

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE2814

Mayman, Jan

Occupation Documentary filmmaker, Journalist, Print journalist

Summary

Jan Mayman is an independent journalist based in Perth, Western Australia. She has worked as an investigative reporter in Australia and the United Kingdom for over 20 years, writing for *The Sunday Times* Insight team as well as *The Age* in Melbourne, *The Canberra Times*, and *The Guardian* and *The Independent* in London. In 1984, Mayman won the Gold Walkley, the highest honour in Australian journalism, and the Bronze Walkley for best newspaper report for her investigation into the deaths of several Aborigines who were in the custody of West Australian police. Human rights groups supported her investigation's claims of human rights abuses, and her reports helped prompt a two-year Royal Commission inquiry into the deaths, leading to reforms within the Australian police and prison systems. Mayman also co-produced and wrote a documentary film about the neo-Nazi movement in Perth, Western Australia, which was a finalist for a 1993 Walkley Award for best television journalism.

Details

Throughout her career, Jan Mayman has taken a special interest in Aboriginal affairs. In the late 1980s she was writing frequently for the political journal, *Australian Society*, and produced a number of feature articles that tackled highly controversial subject matter including Aboriginal deaths in custody, and government corruption.

An article by Mayman in January 1988 – ‘Why Joan Winch Needs \$650,000’ – profiled Winch, then chair of Curtin University’s Centre for Aboriginal Studies, Aborigine of the Year and winner of the Sasakawa Prize from the World Health Organisation for her work in Aboriginal health. According to Winch, Western medical systems weren’t working in Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal people responded best to health care administered by other Aboriginal people. Winch, who had previously operated a mobile medical unit which she drove around the Swan Valley fringe-dweller’s camps, hoped to set up an Aboriginal health college offering education in trachoma, diabetes, pneumonia, ear and eye infections, alcoholism, and gastroenteritis.

In April 1988 Mayman reported on the upcoming Royal Commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody under the leadership of Justice Muirhead. The Commission was set up partly in response to the Vincent report, produced by a committee of representatives from Aboriginal affairs, police and corrective services departments. It was ‘packed with disturbing statistics and vivid graphs’, said Mayman, but was largely shelved by the government, with 26 of its 32 recommendations set aside indefinitely. The report noted that 35.6% of all sentenced prisoners in Western Australia were Aboriginal, as were 91.7% of sentenced and default prisoners held in police lockups. Mayman noted carefully: ‘With a WA state election due early next year, cynics suggest the WA government has decided the risk of a few more black deaths is less electorally dangerous in a deeply conservative state than a full-blooded attack on the social, economic and cultural factors behind the West’s extraordinary black incarceration rate’. By December 1988, Mayman was noting with frustration that the West Australian Premier, Police Minister, and Police Union Society, were all united in their criticism of the Muirhead inquiry.

Mayman didn’t shy from criticism of the government, and in October 1988 wrote a damning report – again in *Australian Society* – on the corruption inherent in government deals with big corporations. West Australian entrepreneurs were making fortunes from gold, nickel, iron ore, bauxite and diamonds, but the billion dollar Petrochemical Deal, driven by the infamous Alan Bond and Bond Corp, was Mayman’s particular focus. As part of the ‘Petro Deal’, the WA government would support and invest in the building of a new petroleum plant, while Bond Corp would take over responsibility for a government pledge to rescue Rothwells merchant bank to the tune of \$150 million. Environmental problems including the potential leakage of cancer-causing chemicals were not being considered, and Mayman observed that many former conservation leaders were now working in government jobs or as part of lucrative consultancies. She reminded readers of the sale of Robert Holmes a Court’s Bell Group, when the Bond Corporation and WA government each bought an equal number of shares for a total of \$340 million, and when the National Companies and Securities Commission was prevented from making a full investigation by ‘the shield of the Crown’, disallowing inquiry into government decisions. A second article, ‘You take the profit, we’ll keep the waste’, examined the environmental cost of the lucrative sand-mining industry in response to a proposal by French company Rhone-Pouenc Chimie Australia to build a plant producing the rare earths phosphate, monazite. The mineral resource would bring \$300 million per year to the state in exports but projects like these, warned Mayman, were threatening some of the state’s most spectacular wilderness areas, and environmentalists were being oppressed by politically powerful mining companies.

Mayman worked at Channel Seven for a time, but was dismayed by the network’s racist approach to news, and found that it was generally uninterested in reporting on Aboriginal affairs. On one occasion, she notified the newsroom of a violent police raid on an Aboriginal community in the Swan Valley. Rather than visiting the camp to interview residents who were willing and ready to tell their story, reporters went to a nearby park where they found a group of Aboriginal mourners who had been to a funeral, and conducted interviews there instead. The mourners had been drinking, and reporters came away with inflammatory material threatening violence to the police that only served to exacerbate the situation. Mayman left the network in disgust.

In 1984, Jan Mayman won the Gold Walkley award for her news reporting on Aboriginal deaths in custody. Nearly a decade later, in 1993, her documentary film *Nazi Supergrass* was a finalist for the Walkley award for best television journalism. The documentary traced the development of the Australian Nationalist Movement, which conducted a violent campaign of racial hatred in Perth from 1986 to 1989, targeting Asians, Jews and Blacks. The group was arrested and convicted based on the evidence of one of its members, Russell Willey, who talked in exchange for immunity. Willey was interviewed for the film in secret locations and disguised his appearance. *Nazi Supergrass* was narrated by Mayman and Steve Bisley, directed by David Bradbury, and produced by Anthony Buckley (copy held at the National Film and Sound Archive).

Events

1984 - 1984

Best Piece of Journalism Newspaper, Television or Radio, Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, Freelance

1984 - 1984

Best Piece of News Reporting, Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, Freelance

1980 - 2010

Published resources

Journal Article

Why Joan Winch Needs \$650,000, Mayman, Jan, 1988

The Issues WA Still Won't Face, Mayman, Jan, 1988

Behind Closed Doors, Mayman, Jan, 1988

WA Resists Reform, Mayman, Jan, 1988

You take the profit, we'll keep the waste, Mayman, Jan, 1989

If only we are prepared to listen: Aboriginal deaths in custody in Western Australia and proposals by the Perth City Coroner, David McCann, for reform of the colonial inquests system, Mayman, Jan, 1989

Videorecording

Nazi Supergrass, Mayman, Jan, 1993

Book

The Indigenous Public Sphere: The Reporting and Reception of Indigenous Issues in the Australian Media, 1994-1997, Hartley, John and Alan McKee, 2000

Site Exhibition

The Women's Pages: Australian Women and Journalism since 1850, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2008, <http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/cal/cal-home.html>

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

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