

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
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Stott Despoja, Shirley

(1936 -)

Born 1 January, 1936, Sydney New South Wales Australia

Occupation Journalist, Print journalist

Summary

Shirley Stott Despoja was the first woman to be employed in the general news room at the *Adelaide Advertiser*. She was that paper's first ever Arts Editor, appointed at a time when the arts were of enormous political and economic significance in South Australia. She brought the arts to the front pages of the newspaper in a manner that had not been achieved before.

In 2010, Shirley Stott Despoja was the inaugural winner of the Mary MacKillop Award at the twentieth annual Catholic Archbishop's Media Citations. She was nominated for her regular column, *The Third Age*, published in *The Adelaide Review*.

According to Archbishop Wilson who presented the award, it was a pleasure to honour such an esteemed writer and champion of equality and social justice.

"Mary MacKillop herself was a great correspondent and also challenged the social norms of the day," he said.

"Ms Stott Despoja's efforts to break the stereotypes of ageing and challenge her peers to be feisty and opinionated would undoubtedly be applauded by Mary."

Stott Despoja also won a United Nations Association of Australia Media Peace Award in 2010 for the same column, for excellence in the promotion of positive images of the older person.

Shirley Stott Despoja was inducted into the Hall of Fame at the May 2013 South Australian Media Awards, honoured by her peers for an outstanding contribution to the South Australian media. In 2017 she was awarded on Australia Day with an OAM, 'for services as a journalist to print media', a citation to bury the lede, if ever there was one. In November 2018 she was inducted into the Australian Media Hall of Fame.

Shirley Stott Despoja is variously described as 'an inspiration', 'a pioneer', 'gutsy', 'an arts editor who changed the city' (Adelaide) and 'a great lady of a great age of print'. But above all, Stott Despoja is best known as a journalist for being 'principled'.

Details

Three things brought me to journalism,' says Shirley Stott Despoja. One of them was experiencing 'the lovely link between the written word and the printed word' while working in the office of *The Anglican* newspaper in the 1950s. Another was befriending Margaret Knightley, sister of journalist Philip Knightley, at school in the 1940s. A third, earlier influence had been a book by Lilian Turner, *Betty the Scribe*. And maybe, even before Betty, there was the 'Opportunity C' class for bright girls that she attended in Hurstville, Sydney, an educational opportunity that provided her with a chance to dream about a future where a woman's intellect was valued and her ability to lead assumed.

No doubt, it would have been easier for Shirley to play the part of a girly-girl, the 'pet who wasn't a threat'; to take the easy pay cheque that any self-censoring journalist can earn. This simply wasn't an option for Shirley, whose integrity and professionalism would not permit this course of action. Instead, throughout the course of her professional and personal life, she has insisted upon standing up for herself, complaining about injustice and corruption and speaking out on behalf of others who didn't have her opportunities, and can't make themselves heard. This has inevitably made her unpopular and, at times, very unhappy. But never untrue to herself, or unappreciated by women (and a handful of men) who know how tough it is to be a trail-blazer.

The chronology of Shirley's career is a familiar one for women finding their way in journalism in the 1950s and 60s (i.e. start

on a small, perhaps provincial newspaper or magazine and then move through a series of reporting and subediting roles on metropolitan dailies) except for the small but very important fact that she never once took a job on the women's pages. She began on the small, but very influential church newspaper, *The Anglican*, run at the time by the charismatic Francis James. There she learned the important practicalities of the newspaper business, leaving a degree at Sydney University unfinished in order to learn what she needed to learn there. There, in that 'world of ideas', where writers like Donald Horne moved, she was known as the 'young atheist on staff', an epithet she initially found very much to her taste. After six months at the *Anglican* she chose to move on. Unfortunately, there was nowhere in Sydney for her to move onto; the men's journalist club closed ranks, to teach the little girl from Rockdale a lesson.

There was work available in Canberra, at the *Times*. Shirley moved there and loved it. There were other women to do the women's pages, and two good years of working general news, with some features and arts criticism. There was also a political awakening. Working as a general reporter, she covered the courts and 'began to learn a lot more about what was done to women and how men were excused from it'. She says that it was then that she saw that the gender barrier and violence fitted together like a hinged tool to control women. She also learned that, no matter how good she was at her job, she would never get better jobs, because she wasn't a man. The editor who employed her told her, in no uncertain terms, that she wouldn't be taking them away from the men.

At about the same time she decided it was time to leave Canberra, she received an offer from the *Adelaide Advertiser* of a C-grade with no women's work. She was to be the only woman working in the general reporting room in a conservative newspaper that nevertheless had impressive talent working on it and was the early journalistic experience for many young men who later became very famous. She initially felt there was an illusion of equality. And in the 70s, with Don Dunstan as Premier of South Australia and a crop of younger editors, including Des Colquhoun, everyone who worked on the *Advertiser* felt they were creating something special, with an influence beyond the State.

Shirley enjoyed the work, was good at her job and was recognised as such; she was to be posted to London to write news and features. Unfortunately, this possibility was never communicated to her in a timely fashion and London in the 1960s was an opportunity lost.

When Shirley married she moved to the literary pages. She used the pages to promote important and radical ideas, as they were being discussed in books. She commissioned interesting people, including the young Anne Summers, to write reviews; independent commentators who were not beholden to *The Advertiser* for their income, who weren't afraid to say what they thought and who brought something fresh to the process of reviewing. Reputations were unimportant; it was the ability to think critically and write independently that mattered. Literary journalism had never been so political or popular. It was work she truly enjoyed: it was exciting and she knew, even in her marginalised position, that she was making a difference.

Not long after her daughter was born, she moved back to Canberra to be with her husband, who had moved there for work. She continued to write features for *The Advertiser*, *The Canberra Times* and other publications, looked after her daughter, had another child (a son) and ultimately ended her marriage. The then editor of *The Advertiser*, Don Riddell, offered her a job as the *Advertiser's* first arts editor in an era when the arts in Adelaide needed to be recognised as a growing political and economic issue as well as of enormous cultural significance. The influence of the Adelaide Festival had changed the scene, and the amount of money being poured into the arts, in Adelaide, enormously. She wrote controversially about the festival directors and took them to task. She wrote reviews that demonstrated critical spirit. She upset people, and got the Arts onto the front page as a result, identifying the existence of an Adelaide 'arts mafia' and demanding that they be accountable to the public, given the significant amounts of money that they received from them. She poked and prodded for a number of years, until the Festival Centre organisers decided to retaliate by withdrawing advertising from the *Advertiser*. But many people recognise that this was a period in which the arts were given prominence and encouragement in the newspaper as never before, and provincial quarrels only lent more spice to the dynamic coverage.

Shirley returned to the literary pages, with a wide-ranging writing brief. Under the stewardship of John Scales the intellectual ferment of the paper continued. It was still a place where ideas could be expressed. Later, she had her column *Saturday Serve*, a space where she explored serious, expressive writing within journalism and could continue to write politically. Initially she did so covertly, using metaphors referring to her cats and garden to convey her message. But as time went by, she became more overt. In the column and other opinion pages, she wrote about domestic violence and child abuse, women's shelters and barriers to women's achievements, and when the spirit of the paper changed under new ownership, she was often abused for her views. She continued to stand up to bullying and, within the limits of the law, has continued to speak out for what she believes in and against those who discriminate. Since leaving metropolitan journalism Shirley Stott Despoja has turned the blow torch onto those who discriminate against the hearing impaired.

Des Colquhoun once told Shirley, 'You know, if you were a man, Shirley, the sky would be the limit.' Shirley knew very early on in her career that she was up against a gender barrier that was so thick she was never going to break through in her time. This didn't stop her from trying, and for the fat lot of good it did her, you have to wonder why she didn't give up. I suspect it might have something to do with the two decent and talented children she was bringing up at the same time. If chipping away at that barrier meant that they might break through it, then there was a point to it. If that is the case, then we should all be grateful to her for her courage, her ability to enrage and her preparedness to weather the ensuing storm. And we should all marvel at her ability to retain her warmth and generosity of spirit. I imagine she would thank her children for that.

Events

1960 - 1990

Published resources

Resource

Shirley Stott Despoja interviewed by Matt Abram, ABC Radio Adelaide, 2017,

https://soundcloud.com/abc-adelaide/shirley-stott-despoja-oam?utm_source=soundcloud&utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Book

Breaking Through: Women, Work and Careers, Scutt, Jocelyne, 1992

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>

Article

Journalist Honoured With Catholic Media Award., 2010,

<http://www.cathnews.com/article.aspx?aeid=22518>

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

[Shirley Stott Despoja interviewed by Nikki Henningham \[sound recording\]](#)

National Library of Australia

[\[Biographical cuttings on Shirley Stott Despoja, advertising journalist, containing one or more cuttings from newspapers or journals\]](#)

Author Details

Nikki Henningham

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