

**Jill Roe. *Our Fathers Cleared the Bush*. South Australia: Wakefield Press, 2016. 264 pp. A\$29.95**

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Now Professor Emerita at Macquarie University, Jill Roe is well known for her influential work in Australian history and social policy history, and in particular for her biography of Stella Miles Franklin and volume of letters between Franklin and her friends, *My Congenials*. This latest work is a very readable, sometimes personal, social history of the Eyre Peninsula where she was born and grew up. '[W]ritten in later life and with a renewed sense of place,' as she explains in her Introduction, this book seeks to capture 'regional experience over time' (ix).

Based in Roe's wide-ranging research, both of her extended family history and of the region as a whole, *Our Fathers* is also written in the hope that more regional histories will follow before memories and records fade and places change beyond recognition. Recognising the limitations of her history, Roe projects what she calls 'a new regionalism' (142). It will be even more inclusive, expanding the Aboriginal history of the area that she had access to, and including the urban dimension of regions, the significance of sport and church as aspects of social cohesion, and so on.

Prior to 2007, when Roe travelled to the Peninsula with a friend, also originally from the area, she had not returned—except for very short visits—for several decades. She followed that journey up with others; talked to her siblings and other Peninsula residents (past and present); and read widely in primary and secondary sources. Most importantly perhaps she began to draw on her memories of her childhood and growing up in the area. Using this range of sources, Roe's narrative develops in what appears to be a naturally meandering way. Yet as a historian, she is in careful control of that narrative and its purpose, and as she expands on and examines aspects of life on the Peninsula which are significant to its particular history, *Our Fathers* becomes a fascinating record of its pre and post-settlement life.

Roughly chronological, Roe's work moves between the particular—often her own experience—and the general. Recounting her mother's death from tuberculosis, which occurred when she was only fourteen months old, leads her to a broader history of women's lives during this time and place. The youngest of four daughters, she was sent at the onset of her mother's illness to live with her maternal grandmother and an unmarried aunt 'up-country' for about five years. This is a happy time for her, but later she comes to realise that the relatively comfortable life her grandmother enjoyed in her older age was very different from her earlier frontier existence.

A 1905 extract from a diary kept by her paternal grandmother (whose life experience roughly paralleled that of Roe's maternal grandmother) gives an indication of the nature of these women's pioneering lives: 'the cook very busy at the flour three turns of bread one of scones one of tarts one of pies one of biscuits and a big cake and 1 custard besides boiling meat vegetables & potatoes, and the Saturday work' (53). Further, her mother's death was one 'of its time' (1), a time, Roe notes, when the statistics on maternal mortality in Australia were still 'appalling' (1), and it was hastened not only by four pregnancies in seven years but also by the exhausting work demanded of women on the land at that time (she died from 'washing too many sheets' (1), as her mother's sister remarked acerbically).

In a similar way, Roe's memory of her life on the farm and the work her father did leads to a more general reconstruction of how the men in Roe's father's and mother's families had 'cleared the bush.' What was often marginal farming land, at least until the arrival of superphosphate then the wool boom, meant relentless hard physical work for these men who often died young. However, the children at least thought that 'farming is fun,' and Roe describes the ways 'work and play often overlapped' (109) for them. She says she still sometimes misses their kelpie, Jock, who 'wasn't flash but . . . appealing in his own way' (113); remembers the challenges Mick the brumby provided his young riders, as well as the games the children devised from their environment.

Roe's primary education, like that of many rural children prior to about the 1950s, took place at a tiny one teacher school. Her sisters travelled to this school in a jinker. By the time Roe was ready for school there was a school bus, a utility with a cover over its back and wooden seats along the sides. This curious vehicle represented 'a microcosm of our world' (89) and, she writes, it was fun too. However, Roe was fortunate to be sent to Adelaide for her secondary education and this opened up opportunities for her to continue to university, ones that her primary school peers did not have.

In her chapter titled 'Survival: The Aboriginal experience' Roe acknowledges both the inadequacy of her understanding of that experience and the paucity of records to draw on what is a vast history. However, 'fresh light has recently been cast on this difficult and challenging subject' (181), in particular through a recent history, *Out of the Silence* (Robert Foster and Amanda Nettlebeck, 2012). What is now, Roe writes, 'generally agreed [is] that the Eyre Peninsula was South Australia's most violent frontier' (187), and that something like warfare took place between the local people and the white colonisers in the early 1840s which resulted in the partial abandonment of Port Lincoln. Later, Aboriginal inhabitants were deprived of their lands and heritage, deprivations from which many have risen to become today's leaders.

As her project broadened, Roe uncovered the ancient history of the Peninsula, writing in the final chapter:

Eyre Peninsula is not only one of the last areas of closer settlement, but also one of the oldest regions in Australia. It is both daunting and exciting to think that the place I come from reaches way back to the fragmentation of the ancient super continent known as Gondwana. (226)

Despite this reach, what is most significant to Roe and to the history she reconstructs in *Our Fathers* is that it is the history of 'ordinary lives' (179). A kind of history, she reminds us, enabled by some of the lessons of postmodernism, which recognises the 'originality' of those lives (a term she takes from Janet McCalman's *Creating Australia*, 1995). In turn this kind of history 'will assist us to re-visit and re-read the national story more effectively' (179). As indeed Roe's book does.

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