

M-m-my Generation?

By

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Panel discussion on the 1960s

**National Biography Award 2000
State Library of NSW**

Saturday, 25 March 2000

I find that many people who were born in the 1960s have a low regard for those of us who came of age in that era.

We are seen as self-obsessed, self-aggrandising and self-promoting. We also stand accused of being numerically dominant - there are just too damn many of us and younger people don't like being outnumbered.

We are accused of hogging all the jobs, especially those in areas like the media where we are able supposedly to dictate the conventional wisdom, including an over-inflated view of own importance, and increasingly we are being accused of being likely to live too long and hence be an economic burden to subsequent generations, including those Slackers who are so critical of us.

No wonder they hate us!

All because we grew up in that supposedly revolutionary era of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll.

Of course a lot of people say that if you can remember the 60s you did not really experience them and perhaps my experiences are inauthentic because I DO remember.

I remember a lot.

And a lot of what I remember is not the rosy, romanticised view of popular legend. Of course there is much that was great about

that decade but there was a dark side too. So much so, that I want to put to you today that there were in fact two 60s.

I will call these the "bad" 60s and "good" 60s and I want to say a little about each.

Much of what I say is dealt with in my recently published autobiography *Ducks on the Pond*.

The title comes from an expression - that, interestingly enough, I first heard in the 1960s when I visited a shearing shed in mid-north South Australia - which was used by shearers to signal to one another that a woman was approaching the shearing sheds.

"Ducks on the pond!" was a warning that an intruder was approaching and a caution that they should refrain from swearing or other behaviour that might offend the intruder until she had gone. Women were not welcome in that exclusively male domain, the shearing shed, and often the men would stop work until she had gone. Since they were paid according to the number of sheep shorn, such stoppages cost them money and only added to their feelings of resentment.

"Ducks on the pond" provided me with the perfect metaphor for the experiences of so many of the women of my generation. We were very much ducks on that great pond of Australian life, sailing into waters where we had never been before and where we were mostly unwelcome.

My book is the story of that generation of women and men.

It is told from the perspective of the experiences, both personal and political, of a woman who was lucky enough to be involved in some of the most exciting political and social upheavals of the post-war period - the student protest movement, the anti-Vietnam war protests, the resident action movement and, of course, the women's movement.

By the end of the 1960s decade we were embarked on the sexual revolution, we had the Pill, we had rock'n'roll and dope and all the other accoutrements of the era and I was revelling in being part of radical politics on the campus of the University of Adelaide.

But this was the end of the 1960s - these were the good times, or so we like to think.

Earlier in the decade, in the "bad" 1960s. things weren't such fun, especially for girls trying to negotiate their way through those pre-Pill but predatory times where almost every date involved an unsought sexual skirmish and where, more than once, I was left on the side of the road having to find my way home because I had refused to "come across".

"But I paid for dinner!" my graceless date would protest. I have described some of this in the book and those passages have been met with absolute incredulity by some of the younger people who have interviewed me. I haven't quite been called a liar, but clearly the sexual mores I describe are - thankfully! - so removed from today's codes of conduct that they have trouble believing me - and I haven't told half of it!

And, it turns out, it wasn't just women who were victims of such predatory behaviour.

Just today I was talking to a man who is currently reading the book and he told me he identified especially with those passages because at the time he was a very pretty boy who also encountered men who would not take No for an answer.

That was the sordid side of so much of sexual mores of the time. But there was worse, far worse, in those pre-Pill days.

To get pregnant in those days was an absolute calamity. If it happened, there were only three options: a "shot-gun" marriage, being hustled away to a home for unmarried mothers - as they used to be called - and give the baby up for adoption as soon as it was born, often without even having the chance to hold it, or illegal and often dangerous, often backyard, abortion.

All of these things happened to girls I went to school with and the last happened to me. I describe in some detail my botched backyard abortion, in Melbourne in 1965, because I want people - and especially young women - never to be ignorant of what it used to be like so that we never bring those bad old days.

And let us not forget that there are many people in our society - still! - who would do just that.

For me, the 1960s was a time of awakening, of learning that we did not have to accept the given. It was very much a journey - with many pitfalls along the way - but with all the adventures that such travel entails. It might sound trite to say so, but it was very much a voyage from the bad lands to those that were at least better.

In the book I tell of a Bohemian Adelaide I was fortunate enough to discover in 1964 when I was 19, of an inner-city salon run by a middle-aged woman called Nell.

There a young girl like myself revelled in being able to escape the stultifying conformity of suburban Adelaide through the company of interesting people like journalists from Rupert Murdoch's *News* and an intriguing, rather shambling man who was introduced to me as a poet. "He's a homosexual," someone whispered to me. John Bray was the first gay man I met and he was indeed a poet, who often wrote in Latin, and was also, it turned out, one of Adelaide's top lawyers. He later became Chief Justice of South Australia.

I also describe the year of 1967 where I not only got married (and did not hesitate to adopt my husband's last name) but spent ten months living on an Aboriginal reserve in far north-west South Australia.

There I was appalled to see young boys shackled with chains to a flag pole and left there all night in the freezing temperatures by the police who wanted a night's drinking before talking these suspected petty thieves into Oodnadatta where they would go before a magistrate.

This was not South Africa under apartheid, or Mississippi under segregation. This was Australia in 1967 - a few months after the May referendum when an overwhelming majority of Australians had voted to accord Aborigines the same citizenship rights as other Australians

It was also supposedly progressive South Australia where Don Dunstan was the Minister and where we might have hoped things would have been different.

This was definitely the "bad" 1960s.

By the late 1960s things were rather different.

I was lucky enough to be involved in the anti-Vietnam War movement, the anti-conscription movement, the student rebellion on campus and most of all and - to me - most importantly of all, the women's movement.

The political movements of the mid to late 1960s were important in several ways. It wasn't just that they challenged the dreadful conservatism of post-Menzies Australia. They gave us new concepts with which to analyse and understand the world. Some of these perhaps encouraged the excessive preoccupation with self that we are accused today of having but these were accompanied by an internationalism that was totally new and fundamentally democratising.

We learned about the struggles of people in other countries, especially in the Third World countries of Bolivia, Cuba and Vietnam where we identified with their struggles for national liberation.

But we also followed the ideas and activities of our counterparts in England, Europe and the United States as student and other young agitators began to put down on paper the ideas that informed their political actions.

There was the Port Huron Statement, that famous document which became something of a Manifesto for what we began to call the New Left (to distinguish it from the boring, authoritarian and doctrinaire Old Communist Party Left).

Soon, too, there were writings about women.

We in Australia learned of an American women's newspaper called *Off Our Backs*. That seemed to say it all!

It was also during the early "bad" 1960s that two of the essential texts of feminism were written: Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* which was first published in 1965 and Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* which, remarkably, first appeared in 1962.

As we women began to devour such books - and we then discovered the classic text *The Second Sex* which Simone de Beauvoir had published in 1949 but which had taken a while to reach us - we began to call everything into question.

That included much of what we had previously either admired or simply taken as immutable. Rock'n'roll, we realised, was in fact "cock rock" - all men. Women's only function in that world in those days was to be groupies. There was no girl-power.

The political leaders whose forcefulness had made them pre-eminent we now realised were in fact male chauvinist, always putting women down and expecting us to play subservient - and mostly sexual - roles in the revolution.

The "good" parts of the decade were suddenly starting to look "bad".. Or at least confusing.

A whole new revolution was under way. It would take the next decade - the 1970s - for it to really take root but it could not have happened with the 60s.

And for that, if for nothing else, I am my generation will always have a soft spot for that engaging decade.