

DEPICTIONS OF WOMEN IN THE HISTORY OF IPSWICH

Knowledge of the world cannot be achieved through abstract reason or divine revelation, but only through the accumulation of observed appearance. The world is a collection of individual bits of data – *facts* – to be unearthed, assembled and organized.¹

How women are depicted in Ipswich history

Although the history of Ipswich and its surrounding regions continues to be mapped in a bid to capture the stories and events of our past, there appears to be a history of a group of people that has not been a direct focus of the study of Ipswich history. Although the area has been shaped by social, economic, cultural and politic developments, the history so far has not focused on a part of society that helped to construct the very history through which it has been forgotten. The women of Ipswich who feature heavily in the making of the town will be recognised through this chapter for the roles that they played in shaping it. While there are many other histories that should also be told such as aboriginal history, children's history, and migration history, this chapter focuses on the roles of women in Ipswich's history.

It is an impossible task, however, to tell the whole story about these women and one that I am not going to attempt. Instead, I will concentrate on photographs, even though these can give only limited clues as to the true history that they capture. Photographs of women throughout different epochs in the region can be read in a way that they shed some light on the roles that women played in the changing town and how they were perceived. These readings, however, can offer to be only that - a reading of images from different eras. While they tell a story about the time, this cannot be taken as direct truth and will be only *one* interpretation of a history that occurred.

I choose photography as the medium for this history for a number of reasons. Terry Smith argues that photography gives us perhaps the most accurate account of historical events (1997: 156). Oral histories were the most widely used medium through which to record events, however, with the advent of photography people began to rely less on memory and use the photographic images as a way to 'remember' the experiences (Berger, 1997: 42). Smith evaluates written word, as opposed to photography, and while it is one of the most relied upon mediums for recording history, it is a text that is fraught with bias. Similarly, the artist may draw an image depicting a certain event in

¹ Slater, 1997: 97

history, but again, may bring to the image any perspective that he or she wishes to communicate to the viewer.

The photograph, on the other hand, shows an image in time that undeniably existed. As Roland Barthes argues 'No writing can give me this certainty [of having existed]. It is the misfortune (but also perhaps the most voluptuous pleasure) of language not to be able to authenticate itself' (1981: 85). However, Smith adds that 'appearances can be, and often are, actively constructed - things or people are arranged, posed, juxtapositions faked' (1997: 159). So, while a photograph gives us a 'true' image, insofar as what is isolated in the image actually existed, we must also be aware that the photographer, like the author or the painter, does have control over the focus of the image and a motivation for what should be included, and excluded in the photograph. This is however, important to our reading as we want to show how women were *depicted*, which does include how the photographer has arranged the image.

This brings about the question of whether a photograph is in fact reality. We have already established that manipulation of the image does occur to some extent, but does this make the photograph any more or less real?

John Berger classifies photographs into two categories - those that are taken for public purposes and those that are for private consumption only (1997: 44). He believes that while it is likely public photographs may have a level of manipulation by the photographer, private photographs are generally 'parallel to the continuity from which the photograph was originally taken' (44). For the purposes of this project, mainly private photographs have been chosen for our reading despite the fact that they are included in public records. They originally appeared in private collections. We can thus assume that only a mild form, if any, manipulation occurs in these photographs, and generally only in the way of organising the subjects to face the camera. Having acknowledged this, we can be relatively confident that these images are an accurate 'portrayal' of the time in which they were taken. I use the word 'portrayal' in this instance, for good reason. For as far as the truthfulness of the photographs that have been chosen for this paper, they can only go so far as to 'represent' a certain point in time.

Hence photographs can only be seen as representations of actual events. While we profess that a photograph may be 'realistic', we need to ask ourselves whether what we are seeing is 'real' (Slater, 1997: 93). We discussed earlier the possibility of the photographer manipulating the image. While this affects the 'reality' of the image, it also gives another reading to the photograph. Because it is a

representation, we can also read what the photographer was wishing to communicate in the image. Why or why not something was included in the frame can offer some meaning. Where the image is set to appear, the context of the photograph, can give a reading (Walker, 1997, 54). For what reason was the picture taken? In this project, we are looking at *depictions* of women in the history of the Ipswich region. While photographs come close to giving us a level of truth in the history we hope to uncover, this history can only be what we can read from the photographs, and what the photographer hoped to show by taking a record of the images that we have selected. In some ways the *way* that women are being depicted in the images tell us more about the way that they were seen in society at that particular time, despite the fact that this may not be the exact reality behind the image.

Sturken and Cartwright in *Practices of Looking*, focus on the importance of ‘reader position’ in viewing photographs. They argue that ‘meanings are produced in part, when, where, and by whom images are consumed and not only when, where and by whom they are produced’ (2001: 46). It is for this reason that it is important that, as the primary reader of the text, I define my position for reading the photographs in a particular way. Because I am focusing mainly on women’s depictions in the photographs this orientates the way in which I will read them. Doing a gendered reading, that is looking at ways in which ideologies are impressed upon the images, will give us more of a focus on women’s images and the certain theories and texts that have influenced the gender readings will also control the way in which I view the images. This would be different, for example, if one was viewing historical photographs from an architectural background that would involve the viewer looking at the buildings and constructions around the Ipswich area. Neither reading is more important than the other, however the view that one brings to the photographs will impact greatly on how the texts are read.

As I have mentioned, ideology is going to be a focus of our readings and I hope to be able to uncover what ideologies operated in relation to women. While the feminist movement was impacting on towns across Australia, women’s roles began to change. Women began to loosen the chains that bound them to the domestic arena and sought to break the common depictions of women – as mothers and homemakers.

In the photographs that have been chosen, it will be interesting to map the changes, if they occurred, with relation to how women were viewed in Ipswich and if the gender roles that were transforming around the country made an impact on the town. Again, photography is an important medium for

following such history; as Sturken and Cartwright note, “images are important means through which ideologies are produced and onto which ideologies are projected” (2001: 46).