

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

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Attard, Monica

Occupation Journalist, Radio Journalist, Television Journalist

Summary

Monica Attard is one of Australia's most respected news and current affairs journalists. She holds five Walkley Awards including a Gold Walkley for Excellence in Journalism. Attard is best remembered, according to author Denise Leith, as 'the woman reporting astride a Russian tank in Red Square in her pyjamas as the communist regime ended'. She spent four years as Russian correspondent for the ABC, reporting on the collapse of the Soviet Union, and received the Medal of the Order of Australia for her services to Australian journalism. In 1997 she published her book, *Russia: Which Way Paradise?* Attard has also reported for Channel Seven News, and the ABC's *Lateline* and *Four Corners*. She has been a long-standing host of ABC Radio's *PM* and *Sunday Profile*, and in 2006 she presented ABC TV's *Media Watch* program.

Details

Born to Maltese parents, Monica Attard was raised in Australia. Her father's stories of Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini imbued her with some understanding of the destructive power of political dictatorships. In 1983 she visited Russia for the first time, expecting to find a workers' paradise. She was disappointed, but developed a strong attachment to the country nonetheless and resolved to spend more time there. Employed by the ABC in radio current affairs for *AM*, *The World Today*, and *PM*, she was finally posted to Moscow in 1990 as Russian correspondent for ABC radio.

Attard witnessed Gorbachev's final year of power, the 1991 coup and the collapse of the Communist Party which saw a 'new' Russia under Boris Yeltsin and capitalism. She met her Russian husband, Grigori (Grisha) Klumov, in 1992, and they married in Moscow in 1993. Interviewed later for Leith's book on war correspondents, *Bearing Witness*, Attard reflected upon her time in Russia and upon lessons learned there on questions of journalistic objectivity and morality. A successful war correspondent, she said, is one who not only covers a story accurately, but brings passion and human feeling to that story. The journalist should not set out to provoke interviewees, but at times there is a moral obligation to speak out. Attard recalled the occupation of Moscow by Soviet Union soldiers in 1991, and her own impassioned reaction:

I said to them, "Do you really believe in what you are doing? You are occupying your own city! Who ordered you here? Oh, the commander. And do you know who the commander answers to? Is he one of the KGB chief's boys? You have got a mother. You have a babushka. Do you think that they are going to like seeing you on television driving through the streets of Moscow on a tank?"

Attard 'couldn't believe that these young kids who were all the beneficiaries of perestroika and glasnost would want to do what they were doing... At the end of the day I had taken a moral stand... I think that there are some situations where it is not moral to be objective'. As a correspondent, she witnessed terrifying scenes of war including an Armenian massacre and a protest around the Lithuanian parliament, where the foyer was manned by children 'no more than seven or eight years old' and armed with Kalashnikov rifles. War stirs passion and overwhelming cruelty, and Attard was unable to function simply as a 'human camera', blindly recording in the most horrific of circumstances. Other journalists remained detached:

Maybe what they are seeing is so horrendous and so morally repugnant to them that the only way they can justify it is by objectifying it. I don't know. Maybe it is because they really believe that the role of the journalist is to sit there and be a human camera but I can't draw that line between humanity and journalism. I don't think journalists are gods or non-humans, or should pretend to be. You have to have some moral certitude and fortitude and stand by your beliefs. If you don't have those beliefs, if you are so morally derelict that you don't see the immorality in your behaviour then OK, you deserve to be haunted.

On returning to Australia in 1994, Attard hosted *PM* for ABC radio, and in 2002 began presenting *Sunday Profile*, a national interview program on ABC local radio. In 2006, she took up the gruelling role of presenter on ABC TV's *Media Watch* program. Attard was nervous about standing in judgement of her colleagues, but believed in the importance of a program like *Media Watch* to keep journalists accountable: 'You need to have a watchdog that's public and open and very effective', she said, 'I think they're a very important part of a working democracy'. She hosted *Media Watch* for one year before returning to *Sunday Profile* in 2007.

Events

2005 - 2005

Broadcast Interviewing, 'On The Brink', Australian Broadcasting Corporation

1991 - 1991

Best Coverage of a Current Story (Print), Australian Broadcasting Corporation

1991 - 1991

Best International Report, Australian Broadcasting Corporation

1991 - 1991

Best Piece of Journalism Newspaper, Television or Radio, Australian Broadcasting Corporation

2002 - 2002

Broadcast Interviewing, 'Kernot, Beazley, The Bishop', Australian Broadcasting Corporation

1985 -

Published resources

Book

Russia: Which Way Paradise?, Attard, Monica, 1997

Bearing Witness: The Lives of War Correspondents and Photojournalists, Leith, Denise, 2004

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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