

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Organisation

Entry ID: AWE3520

The Australian Women's Weekly

(1933 -)

Born 1 June, 1933, Sydney New South Wales Australia

Occupation Magazine

Summary

Launched in 1933, the *Australian Women's Weekly* is the most widely read magazine in the history of Australian publishing. The brainchild of George Warnecke, who was editor-in-chief of the magazine 1933-1938, the *Weekly* was originally owned and operated by Douglas Frank Hewson Packer, entrepreneur and newspaper proprietor, and Edward Granville (Ted) Theodore, former Federal Treasurer and Deputy Prime Minister in the Scullin Government. As a 'women's interests' publication, the *Weekly* offers feature articles on lifestyle, home decoration, cooking, fashion and beauty, parenthood, health and wellbeing, and current affairs. Today it enjoys a readership of 2.5 million, including well over half a million men, and it forms an important part of the Australian Consolidated Press holdings.

Details

In November 1932, Frank Packer and Ted Theodore purchased the *World*, a struggling afternoon newspaper owned and operated by the Australian Workers' Union in Sydney, and re-branded it as the *Star*. Approached by Sir Hugh Denison, who enjoyed a monopoly over the Sydney newspaper market, they were offered £86,500 to close the paper if they agreed not to publish a morning, evening or Sunday newspaper within a 300-mile radius of the city for three years. Packer and Theodore accepted the offer, but the *Weekly* was a way of skirting the embargo: it would be a women's newspaper, and it would be self-sufficient. George Warnecke envisioned the *Weekly* as a publication with an Australian outlook; appealing to all sections of society; and offering an element of news in every article, whether it concern fashion, cookery, or parenting. When the first issue appeared in Sydney on June 10, 1933, it was printed in black-and-white newspaper format and priced at twopence per copy: 'the biggest value in the world'. It had sold out by lunchtime.

The *Weekly* was an instant hit. A Victorian edition was launched as early as September 1933. A South Australian edition followed in 1934; a Tasmanian edition in 1935; and a Western Australian edition in 1936. By 1937, New Zealand had its own edition. A special Women's Weekly radio session was broadcast in 1934, first on 2UW Sydney, then 2GB. Listeners could tune in from 2pm every week day with Dorothea Vautier. That same year, the magazine boosted sales with its new Homemaker section, reflecting widespread interest in the material quality of home life. By the middle of the decade it was offering readers a free novella – usually a romance story – with every copy. With the *Australian Woman's Mirror*, *Woman's Budget* and *New Idea* as its main competitors, the *Weekly* came to dominate the market.

Early editions of the *Weekly* bravely and critically broached the subject of the status of women in Australian society. A series called Careers For Women encouraged women to consider all sorts of employment opportunities: as lawyers, chemists, or even engineers. In addition to the more predictable fashion pages and social notes, the publication included book and theatre reviews, stories of women of achievement, and articles that 'sniped at the prevailing sexism' or advocated equal pay. It was careful, though, not to move too far from social orthodoxy, and when Alice Jackson was appointed acting editor in 1934, the *Weekly* became 'more feminine, less feminist'. Jackson was a trained teacher who had worked for the *Sunday Times* and the *Daily Guardian*, where she introduced her Shopping Bureau advice column, before joining the staff of the *Weekly* during its first year of operation. Historian Denis O'Brien notes that, although the *Weekly* had been launched by Warnecke as a 'straightforward women's newspaper...', the *Women's Weekly* of random nostalgia, satire and affectionate anecdote is mostly that of Alice Jackson's creation'. Light-hearted material, such as the enduringly popular Mandrake the Magician comic, found favour from 1934 onward. Jackson's style must have struck a chord: sales climbed by 60,000 in her first year as editor.

With Jackson at the helm, Warnecke was free to travel to Europe to explore new printing technologies, and to investigate the latest developments in women's papers abroad. From this vantage point, he offered regular reports on world affairs in the lead-up to World War Two. O'Brien finds that 'topical, first-hand reporting of that sort from abroad was unique in Australian

women's publications; it even gave the *Weekly* an edge over daily newspaper rivals'. In 1936, Packer and Theodore imported a new high-spiced colour printing press from the United States at a cost of £130,000. Circulation had increased to half a million within a few years.

From its inception, the *Weekly* was keen to emphasise the number of women journalists on its staff. Adele (Tilly) Shelton Smith joined the Melbourne office in 1933, later moving to Adelaide, then Sydney. In 1938, Dorothy Drain and Esme Fenston joined. Both women would go on to enjoy lengthy careers at the *Weekly*; both went on to take up the position of editor (Fenston for two decades); and both were instrumental to the development of the publication. Other well known women journalists of the era were Jean Williamson, Eve Gye and Joyce Bowden. The *Weekly* did have a male news editor, Leslie Haylen, who left in 1942 to enter politics.

In the years before the war, the *Weekly* tended to divert attention from the inevitable, and softened war-related news items. From mid-1939 it was even publishing a separate monthly fashion supplement. Once fighting had commenced in earnest, it did offer regular reports on the events of war; it consistently provided patterns for readers to sew socks for soldiers; and it published rousing poetry by Dame Mary Gilmore, including the immensely popular *No Foe Shall Gather Our Harvest* (1940) and *Singapore* (1942). It was careful, though, to retain its positive tone. The *Weekly* was 'unashamedly propagandist... Daily newspapers could depict the carnage; the *Weekly* was there with a cheering cup of tea for the survivors'. Good news was emphasised; themes of service and patriotism constantly reiterated. Reports were published from London under the name of Mary St Claire, who was, in fact, several persons, but primarily the journalist Anne Matheson. From October 1940 to September 1945, Adele Shelton Smith's regular section, *Letters From Our Boys*, gained enormous popularity. Shelton Smith became the first accredited female correspondent from Australia to be sent to Malaya, and filed reports for the *Weekly* designed to reassure wives and mothers that their boys were in fine shape with high morale. In the event, some criticised her writing (and Bill Brindle's photographs – particularly one of a smiling taxi dancer wearing a Digger's hat) for making it look as if the boys were having far too good a time. Shelton Smith was deeply upset by this interpretation of her journalism, but the matter found some resolution later. Alice Jackson, too, was given accredited war correspondent status and sent regular reports from abroad.

During wartime, resources developed for the *Weekly* despite printing restrictions, and it began publishing coloured photographic covers. By mid-1946 it was selling 700,000 copies per week. In fact, the *Weekly* 'became something of a textbook on post-war domestic rehabilitation', offering advice on house plans and home furnishings. It also began to focus heavily on fashion, employing Mary Hordern (younger sister of Gretel Packer, Frank's wife) as a fashion contributor, and holding four annual Paris fashion parades between 1946-1949. From 1947, Dorothy Drain began penning her own column, 'It Seems To Me'. It remained a popular feature of the magazine for sixteen years.

In 1950, the *Weekly* published a serialised version of Nevil Shute's *A Town Like Alice*. That same year, Alice Jackson resigned as editor of the *Weekly* and Esme Fenston took over. Fenston was, writes O'Brien, a woman of above-average intelligence but unassuming character: 'everything in her professional and private background was orthodox, stable and firmly planted in simple virtues'. Throughout the 1950s, the magazine adopted a safe, unthreatening tone, while 'the emancipated woman had almost disappeared' from its pages. Emphasis was once again squarely on the family, and notions of the ideal wife and mother. Sales did not suffer for this, and circulation reached 800,000. Fenston introduced the *Weekly* national portraiture prize in 1955. Anything on the subject of the royal family guaranteed sales, and a special edition of the magazine in 1954 showcasing images from Queen Elizabeth's royal visit sold 950,000 copies. Sales following her second visit in 1963 reached one million – features on the Queen outranked the Beatles in popularity.

Like Fenston, the *Weekly* had spent its formative years immersed in orthodoxy, and though the decade of the 1950s was and is famous for a certain amount of parochialism, there were a number of societal shifts underway that required some innovative thinking at the publishing house. To begin with, the role of editor began to call upon substantial entrepreneurial skill. Balance sheets had to add up; advertising quotas were of paramount importance. The *Weekly* was popular with advertisers – its influence was strongly felt – and it was often used to peddle a particular message. When the Australian fruit market experienced a glut of oranges, the *Weekly* ran competitions for recipes containing oranges. It promoted Australian wool with a series of fashion awards. It ran competitions for domestic budgeting. In 1951 it managed to popularise square-dancing by holding a national contest with prize money of £6,000.

Fenston was juggling market pressures, but she was also juggling a changing readership. An increasing percentage of the population was aged under 21, and the *Weekly* needed to appeal to younger readers. From 1954, a separate Teenager supplement was included with the magazine. By 1959, Teenagers' *Weekly* had been launched as a lift-out. As the 1960s ushered in new attitudes about marriage, families, women and sexual relationships, those simple virtues so valued by Fenston and others were constantly challenged. In essence, the magazine remained fairly conservative with continuing features on diets, cooking, knitting, hairdos, beauty, gardening, and children. With time, though, it had to be less careful about adopting a moral stand on subjects like sex before marriage, or cohabitation between unmarried couples. Public curiosity about sex was burgeoning, and the *Weekly*'s lift-outs on health and medicine shifted their focus accordingly. An article on the contraceptive pill in 1964 peaked circulation numbers for the decade. Fenston herself suggested a long feature that same year on sexual knowledge among girls and women, asking readers 'what do you tell your daughter?' and 'what did your mother tell you?'

The focus on attracting younger readers continued, and by 1974 the *Weekly* was said to be read by 54% of Australian girls aged between 14 and 19 years. Even knitting patterns were aimed at teenagers. A *Disc Digest* column discussed pop records, and an American comic strip, *Teena*, was popular. More adventurous feature articles found favour throughout the

1970s, including this one – Sex and the Working Woman – in November 1974:

There's good news and bad news about the sex life of the working woman. The good news is she's never been as free to enjoy it, however, whenever, wherever, and, presumably, with whomever she pleases. The bad news is she seems not to be taking advantage of the good news... Despite what you hear at the hairdresser or read in the marriage manuals, there is a growing suspicion that the working woman is giving more and more time and effort to the call of duty and less and less to the joys of sex.

The employment of feminist and journalist Kay Keavney from 1965 made for a refreshing shift in tone in some editions of the *Weekly*. Keavney was a specialist in feminist affairs, and secured an exclusive interview with Germaine Greer for the magazine in 1972. Despite this, the magazine as a whole kept its traditional flavour, discussing homes, fashion, and gardens, and publishing romantic serials. An article entitled '1,000 Authentic Aboriginal Words' in 1975 did not lead into any kind of political discussion around the country's indigenous population. Rather, it was a list of words in various Aboriginal dialects that translated to mean 'camp', 'fireplace', 'river', 'seaside' etc, that readers might like to use when naming their homes according to topographical location. On the subject of women's rights, the magazine was distinctly cautious in approach and often came under attack by women activists who found copious examples of sexism and anti-feminism in its back issues. Yet the *Weekly* had come to its prominent position precisely by keeping to majority tastes, not by stirring controversy, and this was a strategy that it was reluctant to dispense with. Fenston defended its editorial policy not to enter into party politics: this did not imply that women were uninterested or incapable of understanding politics, she said, but simply that the magazine sought to attract mass circulation and was therefore obliged to select material 'of the broadest appeal'. Decisions on the choice of articles were, she pointed out, always made by women, and the magazine continued to publish features on married women and work, for example, or the position of women in the workforce.

Esme Fenston died in 1972; Frank Packer followed just two years later. There was some continuity with the employment of Dorothy Drain as editor, but she held the position for just five years before retiring, and the *Weekly* entered a new phase. In 1975, a young Ita Buttrose was appointed as editor, passing the baton to Dawn Swain just one year later upon her promotion as editor-in-chief of women's publications at Consolidated Press. Meanwhile, the *Weekly* was increasingly challenged by competition for advertising from the new colour television. This, coupled with uneconomic use of newsprint and a large page size, meant the publication was in financial trouble. With Kerry Packer at the helm of the organisation, the decision was made in 1979 to convert the magazine to a square-backed glossy publication using coated paper from Finland, with pages glued to a spine instead of stapled.

By 1980, the *Weekly* was selling for 50c a copy, and included a regular television supplement. That year the magazine also included an innovative editorial feature, The Voice of the Australian Women, canvassing the responses of 30,000 women to a questionnaire around abortion, national service, the dole, health funds and education. Special editions of the *Weekly* on the marriage of Prince Charles and Princess Diana in 1981 sold in unprecedented numbers. Nonetheless, in the face of rising costs, it was decided in 1983 to release the magazine as a monthly publication while retaining the name of the *Australian Women's Weekly*. Today, under the editorship of Deborah Thomas, and with a circulation of 530,000, the *Weekly* continues as one of Australia's most popular magazines.

Events

1933 -

Published resources

Book

The Weekly: A lively and nostalgic celebration of Australia through 50 years of its most popular magazine, O'Brien, Denis, 1982

Edited Book

75 Years of the Australian Women's Weekly: Memories and great moments from Australia's most loved magazine, Ekberg, Katie, 2008

Videorecording

The Weekly's War, Ramsey, Stephen (director) and Baker, Suzanne (producer), 1982

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

Archival resources

State Library of Victoria

[Papers, 1922-1982 \[manuscript\].on](#)

Author Details

Barbara Lemon

Created 5 September 2008

Last modified 20 November 2018