

Book Launch – Speech 24 August 2017

It is my great honour to be here tonight to launch the book:

*Mistress of her Profession: Colonial Midwives of Sydney, 1788-1901*, written by Dr Lesley Potter MACN, published by Anchor Books.

When we capture a nation's history through the narrative of the midwives assisting in birth, we capture in essence the birth of a nation. We capture a period in time, where the most intimate and precious gift we can give – the gift of life – is acknowledged by the silent army of women working in the community to see this gift delivered safely.

As you read the chapters of this book it is not unnoticed that very little was recorded in letters and diaries. It is a tribute to our author Lesley Potter that she has pursued this history, and perhaps reading between the lines, to capture the birth of Sydney culture and hierarchy in its early settlement days.

As highlighted on page 7, I am grateful to Lesley for balancing the 'pull' of statistics and proof of imaginative, conjectural and narrative style of historical writing. This honors the midwives in their humble yet challenging roles and conditions, as the stoic women of this time period.

Why didn't midwives record in more detail the nature of their roles and why didn't women write in letters and journals of their trials and tribulations of pregnancy and childbirth? I ask this question as a reader however I can only begin to imagine how Lesley felt as the author.

It was a time of knowing, doing and being, rather than discussing and recording. Perhaps signifying the passing of ancient wisdom and knowledge that is so inherent in women's roles in society.

This is an important book which brings Australia's 19<sup>th</sup> Century midwives out of the shadows of history and into the limelight, while placing the current-day profession into context.

This book also fills a gap in Australian history.

For too long the role and work of colonial midwives has been unacknowledged, unexamined and under-represented.

The *Mistress of Her Profession* consists of 10 chapters on different aspects of colonial midwifery, with a central focus on the development of midwifery education and training in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Interspersed throughout the book are case studies of nine midwives who, to some extent, exemplify the very essence of each chapter.

From the trials of a midwife travelling on a disease-ridden ship across the globe to arrive in Australia, to the stories of traditional Aboriginal birthing — the varied lives of midwives in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Sydney are perfectly captured through these compelling case studies.

This book gives colonial midwives a voice and restores them as an integral part of colonial history. Through the individual stories of colonial midwives, we're given insight into the strength and stamina that these women showed in the face of a system geared against them.

Lesley says on page 102 that "*in writing about these midwives, an endeavour has been made to name as many as possible in order to bring them to light, out of the anonymity of history*". And who knew there would be so many Mary's!

Understanding our past helps us understand our psyche and why midwives have such a strong determination today.

This book is written encompassing several themes:

- The importance of individual experience
- A reflection of colonial times
- Gender equality
- Midwifery as a commercial enterprise
- Illegal midwifery practices
- Education and Training
- Evolution of the occupation

I would like to explore these further:

### **The importance of individual experience**

A point of difference between this book and other historical records is that Lesley paints a picture of colonial midwives as real women. As individuals, rather than a collective.

Lesley's expert research and writing skills are evident throughout the book, as she carefully weaves historical facts into compelling narratives and case studies.

This provides us real heroines, as this historical narrative allows the reader to feel connected to these women, to get a glimpse at a time in history that could have fallen silent or been lost if it wasn't for this important research.

### **A reflection of colonial times**

There is a tendency for the history of midwifery to be written as if the occupation existed in isolation from the rest of society. However, Lesley emphasises in her book that women working in midwifery were still privy to societal pressures and change. In fact, midwifery formed part of the social fabric of the community during this time.

The first group of women to practise midwifery in the early years of the colony of New South Wales were mainly convicts.

All were victims of their social class.

However, each midwife, no matter what her status in society, made an impact in her community. This is evidenced through the Attorney General not pursuing charges of manslaughter for two midwives in cases of maternal and infant death.

### **Gender equality**

To talk about the history of midwifery, is to talk about gender equality. In particular, the struggles women faced to be equal in a professional setting.

On page 96 Lesley empathises that even by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, "*midwifery and nursing remained closely related to the status of women in society and hence neither midwives nor nurses had any direct representation to government bodies, such as the Board of Health or the Parliament.*"

Furthermore, historical records and documents disproportionately reflect the opinions of male doctors rather than the lived experiences of midwives during this time.

Throughout the book, it is evident how the perceived inferiority of females, infiltrated every sphere of society. In the medical sphere, this was apparent as women had to fight for their right to practice as doctors and to legislate the midwifery professions.

Lesley records how significant Florence Nightingale was in elevating the profession through advocating for principles of sanitation — but I am also grateful that Lesley acknowledges Nightingale's influence to situate midwifery (and nursing) as strictly the female's domain: On page 28 she writes "*Midwifery never succeeded in removing the domestic service images of ministering angel, subordinate and handmaiden roles until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.*" This often goes unsaid but this gender bias continues to plague our professions today.

Midwifery blurred the lines between a woman's "*domestic role*" in society and the commercial world.

So let's look at **midwifery as a commercial enterprise**

Midwives were among the many women engaged in small business enterprises in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, not only important to the social dynamics and health factors of the society, but they were also economically important

However, many midwives struggled to be economically viable in the competitive world of commerce that was predominantly a man's domain.

Lesley acknowledges through Alford that whilst women's work (both paid and unpaid) was economically valuable to the viability of the colony their contribution was largely ignored.

### **Illegal midwifery practices**

This book also touches on the dark underbelly of midwifery during colonial times. This includes the participation of midwives in illegal abortions, infanticide and baby farming, as ways of dealing with unwanted pregnancies and children.

### **Education and training**

The emergence of midwifery training had a long and complicated history that is thoroughly explored within the pages of this book.

To comprehend the origins of the training of midwives in New South Wales, it is necessary to review the practices of midwifery training in Britain.

In Australia, early midwives were usually untrained and as previously noted, were often convicts.

Almost all improvements in childbirth in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century were discovered in Britain, Europe and North America, and this knowledge filtered slowly through to Australia.

To a lesser extent, was the influence of overseas trained midwives who migrated to Sydney. These qualified and experienced English, Scottish and Irish midwives raised the standard of midwifery practice in New South Wales by passing on their knowledge and experience to untrained midwives.

The 1890s was a decade in which there were intense moves to train, regulate and register midwives in the colony. Until the formation of the Australasian Trained Nurses' Association in 1889, there was no organised effort to regulate midwifery training. By the turn of the century, four major midwifery training schools had evolved in Sydney.

When reflecting on the origins of midwifery training, Lesley says on page 47: "*Their importance for the history of midwifery in the colony and their impact on the future training of midwives cannot be underestimated*".

Through the education evolution '*midwives were enabled to be seen 'as an important facet of maternity care, rather than dangerous amateurs*'" (pg 101).

### **Evolution of the occupation**

Midwifery was not always seen as a legitimate medical profession, rather, it was perceived outside of the health care system. With the passing of time the tone, language and attitude towards midwives changed.

This book reminds us of a time where women were subsumed under their husband's names and occupations, and were invisible in many ways as midwives.

I couldn't help but compare the challenges of these midwives in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to 21<sup>st</sup> century midwifery. In some ways the profession has come so far. Yet who knew midwives would still be fighting so hard now to be recognised as entrepreneurs in community based midwifery practice, fighting for admitting rights to hospitals and servicing women with home births. Gender bias continues to plague our society and professions.

In our current climate where there is much focus on community and primary health care the practice of midwifery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was fundamentally based upon the care we are aspiring to provide today. This was largely attributed to women not being welcome to work in the public male domain of industry, business, medicine and politics as a women's proper place was in the home. This secured the work of Sydney midwives predominantly working in the private sphere.

Lesley acknowledges that whilst 5 midwives were working in Sydney and advertising their services, living in the limits of Sydney there was no indication that they formed any cooperative unit, nor was there any awareness of themselves as a professional group. Such a group, if it existed, as writes Lesley, may have given these women some prominence. Reading this was a good reminder for me personally of the importance of my position and of the colleges we have today.

Lesley I hope there is a day when a family donates belongings to our Archives that contains a diary of a midwife and you get to fill your gaps in understanding the profession you have dedicated your life to.

In reading this book a passion is invoked in me, to honour these remarkable women, their challenges and their sacrifices and to use our influence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to promote the work of the midwifery and nursing professions, to connect directly to politicians and decision makers, in honour of women 150 years ago who would never have imagined that we could.

In securing this important history of the midwives of the colony of Sydney I cannot help but think how grateful an historian will be in another 150 years when he or she reads the work of Lesley Potter, and with gratitude that the foundations of a society were not lost as they write about our times, our trials and our tribulations as we continue to strive for equality and recognition as professions.

**So who is the woman, the author, behind this beautifully written piece of work?**

Lesley Potter is a retired nurse and midwife with over forty years' experience working at various Sydney hospitals in management, education and clinical midwifery.

She has an impressive list of credentials and academic qualifications, including a BA in Theology, MA in English Literature and PhD in History.

Lesley is an Honorary Associate for the Nursing History Unit at the University of Sydney Nursing School and President of the Randwick & District Historical Society.

Throughout her distinguished career and continuing into her retirement, Lesley has made significant contributions to the Australian College of Nursing and the nursing and midwifery professions.

As an Honorary Archivist at the Australian College of Nursing, Lesley is a guardian of our professional history. The Australian College of Nursing holds the largest nursing archives in Australia.

Nursing and midwifery historians like Doctor Lesley Potter – are incredibly important to our professions.

This book is the result of Lesley's thesis on midwives living in the colony of New South Wales from 1788-1901.

This book beautifully illustrates the practice of midwifery in Sydney on the backdrop of the colony of NSW. The patchwork of women's childbirth experiences through the notations of the midwives of Sydney has been woven together to provide a platform for our present and future to be captured.

The title of Lesley's book, *Mistress of her Profession*, is a quote from one of the colonial midwives, Elizabeth Turnley, profiled in this text. Elizabeth refers to herself in this manner, while advertising her services as a midwife.

When asked about the origins of the title of her book, Lesley said: "*I am fascinated that she describes herself as such, mainly because midwifery was not thought of as a 'profession' in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Just what Elizabeth Turnley understood by the term 'profession', I have no idea but wish I knew.*"

Lesley's book enlightens readers to the conditions and patterns of health care and midwifery in the NSW colony.

It reinforces the idea that to be able to grow and develop as a profession with passion and pride, it is essential that we honour where we came from. The strength and resilience we require to lead health and aged care reform in the future, is evidenced throughout our past.

I hope every undergraduate midwifery student is given a copy of your book as part of their curriculum.

Lesley, in a distinguished 40 year career you would have delivered and cared for hundreds of women and newborns but perhaps your greatest accomplishment from conception to delivery will be the arrival, following a long gestational period, of this book, *The Mistress of Her Profession*.

In closing I would like to acknowledge that Lesley wrote this book with the hope that we, as readers, will take away some new knowledge about the history of the colony and, above all, will take away a knowledge of colonial midwives; recognising their skill and worth in providing care to women and their families. Considering the depth of knowledge and careful consideration of individual experiences within the book, there's no doubt that this will be the case.

On behalf of the Australian College of Nursing and in honour of your work I would like to give you this gift in gratitude.

Thank you.

Adjunct Professor Kylie Ward

CEO, Australian College of Nursing