

Speaker Series Ida Leeson: A Life Not a Blue Stocking Lady with Dr Sylvia Martin

Interviewer [00:00:00] Welcome to the Inner West Library Speaker series. Before we begin, I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal Wangal people of the Eora nation and pay my respects to the elders past, present and emerging. Today, we welcome author and historian Dr. Sylvia Martin, who has published widely. Our conversation will be about her award - winning biography, *Ida Leeson A Life, Not a Bluestocking Lady*. Sylvia has written widely about feminist history and the neglected women in Australian history. In 1932, Ida Leeson became the first female librarian at Mitchell Library amidst a male dominated climate. Tying in with the podcast today. I would like to mention the large LGBTQI collection at Inner West Libraries and the podcast today is reflective of this collection. We have also named one of our balconies at Marrickville library after Ida.

[00:00:58] Welcome, Sylvia. Hello, Lysele. How are you? Good. How are you? Good.

[00:01:04] So what inspired you in writing the biography of Ida Leeson *A Life*?

Dr Sylvia Martin [00:01:11] Well, actually, a librarian inspired me. I was at the launch of my first book, *Passionate Friends*, which is about a an Australian poet called Mary Fullerton. And her long term relationship with a woman called Mabel Singleton and her friendship with Miles Franklin. And I was at the launch of this book. And afterwards, this librarian came up to me and said, I think you should write about Ida Leeson. And I, the name, was familiar to me. And I went back and I found that Miles Franklin knew her really well. And she talked about her in her diary and in her letters. So I had a little bit of introduction and she sounded absolutely fascinating the more I looked into it. And I was fortunate enough to get the S.H. Carey Fellowship at the Mitchell Library to do my research on it.

Interviewer [00:01:59] It sounds fantastic.

[00:02:00] So when I was reading your book, I found the expression the bluestocking lady quite interesting. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Dr Sylvia Martin [00:02:09] Yeah. Yes. The Bluestocking lady was a disparaging comment that was made by a former public librarian, John Metcalfe, who actually didn't get the Mitchell Librarianship when Ida Leeson did. But he was promoted above her. So that's a long story. But anyway, it was in the 80s he was retired and he made this comment about the early lady librarians, as he called them. And he said they were women who had a university degree but weren't likely to get married. And he was really referring to women like Margaret Windeyer and Maude Fitz Harding, who were early librarians, who came from the very upper class families. Margaret Windeyer's father was a Supreme Court judge and Maud came from a very well known legal family, but Ida Leeson couldn't have been further from that description. So that's why I called her not a bluestocking lady, because she was born in Leichhardt and Leichhardt when she was born in 1885, was a very working class suburb. It was known as Struggle Town. Her father was a carpenter. And in the eighteen nineties depression, he went to Western Australia to find work and never came back. Her mother was a seamstress, so she brought up the children. There was no way that Ida was going to get to university except under her own steam. So she got a scholarship to Sydney Girls High School and then she got a scholarship to Sydney University. And she was one of the early women graduates in 1906. And she did a B.A. in History honours and started at the public library in 1906, just after she graduated when she was 21.

Interviewer [00:04:03] That's really, really fascinating, Sylvia. So how would you describe Ida? Because, you know, apparently she was extraordinary.

Dr Sylvia Martin [00:04:11] Yes, she was extraordinary, she was extraordinary many ways. I mean, she was extraordinary because of her appearance. She was a very small woman. And there's a picture of her in the front of my book. Actually, she's sort of striding across the front of the page. She always wore a suit, a dark suit, but with a skirt and a collar and tie. And she always wore a hat and she wore a sort of a pork pie hat. And then in summer she might have worn a linen suit with a straw hat. And then she wore very sensible lace up shoes and Lyall's stockings. So she was she was quite unusual to look at, to start off with. And she was also extraordinary because she lived with her partner, Florence Birch, for, well, they were together for 50 years. And she was extraordinary in her work because she was one which was certainly what we'd call today, a workaholic. She was an absolute, absolutely dedicated researcher. She, on her long service leave even when she was away on holidays in London, she found the

missing Matthew Flinders log in a public record office in 1927. And she made other amazing discoveries. And, you know, yes, we certainly called her a workaholic.

Interviewer [00:05:25] So the Matthew Flinders Log is also very interesting because I actually come from Mauritius, and I do know, the story of Matthew Flinders being imprisoned on the island. I was quite fascinated reading that part. So in terms of Ida. She was very much instrumental in developing the collection and exhibitions at Mitchell Library. Yes. Why was that? Was that due to her passion or her initiative? What else can you tell me about that?

Dr Sylvia Martin [00:05:54] Well, I think it was her passion and her initiative. She was an amazing. She first started off in the Mitchell Library after she transferred from the public library when the Mitchell Library was started as a cataloguer. She learned cataloguing from the poet Christopher Brennan, who also worked there and cataloguing in those days was a pretty difficult subject. You know, it required quite a lot of research, it required her working in other languages. So she was a brilliant woman and she was just dedicated to her work there.

Interviewer [00:06:32] So I know that from your book, Ida was friendly with many people, but also she was quite stern with others. But I do remember her being very friendly with prominent people such as Miles Franklin and the Griffins.

[00:06:46] What attracted what had what attracted them to her? Well, Miles Franklin was one of the writers at the time, and she used to go into Mitchell nearly nearly every day, several days a week. She'd go in on the train from where she lived and come in and work in the Mitchell. And a lot of writers did. I mean, we might not realize today that the Mitchell Library was actually the hub of literary activity and intellectual activity in Sydney at the time that you couldn't just go to a bookshop and buy a book. So Mitchell Library got all the new Australian books. So a lot of the writers used to actually go in to do their research, but also to read the latest writing. So many writers collected in the library and Miles became friendly with Ida and used to bring her flowers from her garden. She'd have zinnias on her desk. And Ida also helped in proofreading, for instance, she proofread the woman I wrote my P.H.D on Mary Fullerton. She proofread a book of her poems that Miles was getting published. So there was a lot of interaction in the library.

[00:07:59] I think a very social person as well. I believe that she was very much involved in the, you know, the young theatrical productions that the Griffins put together.

Dr Sylvia Martin [00:08:10] Yes, she was. The Griffins and Ida are together because of will they come together because of Florence really. Florence Birch, Ida's partner was a Theosophist. She was actually an anthroposothist which was the breakaway movement from theosophy. And so were Marion Mahony Griffin and Walter Burley Griffin. And Ida and Florence rented a house in Castlecrag, the suburb that the Griffins started as sort of the ideal suburb. And they lived in a Griffin house there. So that's how they came to know the Griffins, who became very friendly with them.

[00:08:54] What's the rest of your question.

Interviewer [00:08:55] So I think she was involved very much in doing the lighting for the productions that the Griffins put together.

Dr Sylvia Martin [00:09:01] Oh, yes, she was. She was. Yet there was the. Was an amphitheatre in Castlecrag and Marion Mahony Griffin used to put on plays there. Florence was involved in them. And Ida was not a thespian, but there is a wonderful photo of her that's in the Willoughby Library. And it's reproduced in my book of Ida sitting in the audience.

[00:09:20] And she's opened up in a winter coat and a hat and she's holding a car headlamp at the stage to light the stage for one of the productions. Extremely eccentrically lady.

Interviewer [00:09:33] So you've mentioned a little bit about Florence Birch already. Could you expand more about the relationship between the two women and also how controversial that was for the time?

Dr Sylvia Martin [00:09:44] Well, it was controversial for the time, except that they just Ida just went around her way through her life. Florence was involved in everything she did. Everybody knew about her at the library. She used to bring her to functions. Florence was always there. And I don't know that Ida ever mentioned the word lesbian,

but they were an accepted couple and they were an open couple, which may have had something to do with the fact that it was very hard for Ida to get the Mitchell librarian position, although she was the most qualified for it in 1932. The word was that it was because she was a woman and that that position could never go to a woman. But I suspect that it had a bit to do with the fact that she was a lesbian as well. But anyway, to get back to where she met Florence, I found it really hard to find out where they met this. There was nothing.

[00:10:40] Nobody remembered where they met. And I discovered that Florence worked for the YWCA in Sydney and she was a New Zealander. But she came and she worked in Sydney for the YWCA. And I looked through their records. And in 1910, Florence had a literary circle at the YWCA and Ida's name is there. So I suspect that's where they met. So they kind of met at a formal version of a book club, really in about 1910. And then Florence went back to New Zealand in 1912 because she got a very senior job with the YWCA there. And she opened a whole of different branches in New Zealand. She used to come back every year and stay with Ida. And then she actually retired. She was really exhausted in 1923. So that's quite a long time after they met. But then they moved in together for the first time and they, first of all, lived in a flat in Stanley Street just near the library. And then they moved to Castlecrag in 1930 and lived there for three years. And the rest of their lives, they lived in a flat in Kirribilli and they were together until Florence died in 1957.

[00:11:53] So as I mentioned before, obviously that was very controversial from the times. But it seems that the relationship was very strongly. Well, very strong and had a strong foundation.

[00:12:10] After Florence died a friend of theirs told me that when she met Ida just after Florence had died, she said Ida was pale yellow in colour and she asked her how she was feeling. And she said, I'm bleeding inside. So I found that incredibly touching and moving, very sad about her partner that she'd been with for 50 years.

Interviewer Yeah. Very sad as well.

Interviewer [00:12:37] Yeah. So, Sylvia, there's been a lot of speculation about Ida's bloomers. Can you talk about this?

Dr Sylvia Martin [00:12:46] I can. I can. There is I devoted a whole chapter at the end of the book called the spinsters bloomers Ida's bloomers because it kept coming up. Whenever I interviewed anybody, there's this Bloomers story would come up and others. It's so weird. And I found out that it originated with the historian Manning Clark, who was in fact, very friendly with Ida and Florence, but he used to circulate the story about Ida's bloomers, and he says that when Ida was the Mitchell Librarian and because she always wore a skirt, she didn't wear slacks, but she would go up the ladder to get books and the readers would ask her to go up to the ladder because every day she had bloomers down to her knees and they would be have a different coloured bow on them. So the readers wouldn't. It's a complete myth. It never happened. Florence was the one who had bows and not Ida. And also Ida did didn't go up. There was no ladder in the Mitchell Library where the Mitchell Library was then, is now the reader's room. And the main Mitchell library was the public library. And so the old Mitchell Library didn't have ladders to the shelves. The young readers didn't read in. They were mainly well established researchers who read in there. And Ida wouldn't have been climbing ladders us to fetch books for them. So I don't know where the story comes from. But anyway, Manning Clark perpetuated it and told it everywhere. And it it's a story that's lived on.

Interviewer [00:14:22] How strange!

Dr Sylvia Martin [00:14:24] Well, I sort of think that Ida was a woman that men couldn't quite cope with. They couldn't. You know, she was such an unusual woman. And although it's about bloomers. But she was a middle aged woman when he met her. And so it's sort of not sexual, but it's slightly prurient. I think it's I think it's a very, very weird story. And I do try to tease it out in the book.

Interviewer [00:14:54] Very strange.

[00:14:55] So working in a library. I would like to ask you what you're reading or watching and listening at the moment?

Dr Sylvia Martin [00:15:03] Well, I've just read a wonderful biography by Cathy Perkins, who actually works at the State Library about Zora Cross, who was a writer who is now totally unknown, but who published a book of love poetry in 1917, which was pretty

unusual for the time. And nobody knows about her. Nobody knows about her much these days. I do. But that's because I happened to work on Miles Franklin and her contemporaries. But Cathy found this book in the State library and became fascinated by her life. And it's a really wonderful biography. So I would recommend that. What else have I been reading? I've just finished Rebecca Makkai's book *The Right Believers*. She's a US writer, and it's about the AIDS era in Chicago in the 1980s. So it's sort of very moving. And to be reading about a pandemic that's earlier than this one. Yes. And it's a fascinating book.

Interviewer [00:16:03] Interesting. So I believe that you have a new book out this year. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Dr Sylvia Martin [00:16:08] Yes. Yes, I do.

[00:16:09] It's a book called *Sky Swimming*, and the subtitle is *Reflections on Autoslash Biography People and Place*. And in this, I've sort of turned my well what has been my biographer's lens onto myself.

[00:16:25] And somebody said to me when they read a couple of the essays, you you're really writing a biography of your life rather than any sort of confessional autobiography. So I quite like that description and it's a series of memoir essays. So it's about my family. It's about my relationship with my partner of over 30 years. And we built a mud brick house together in the 1980s, which was fairly unusual for two women. And and so there's also it also talks quite a bit about writing biography. So my subject of my biographies do crop up in the book, including Ida Leeson. And the book was published by my wonderful publisher, very Terry and White of University of Western Australian Publishing. And she published it came out in February this year. She also published my last biography, which was about Aileen Palmer, who was a poet and an activist, and she published that book too.

Interviewer [00:17:30] I look forward to reading your new book, Sylvia. I think we've come to a close. Thank you so much for your time today, Sylvia. Oh, you're welcome. Thank you, everyone, for listening in and looking out for our upcoming podcast on our inner West Council website on the What's on and our social media channels. Thank you so much, Sylvia.

Dr Sylvia Martin, Interviewer [00:17:50] Thanks, Lysele. Bye bye. Bye.