



ISSN 2754-5547

<https://doi.org/10.52230/JVON5553>

James Keating, *Distant Sisters: Australasian Women and the International Struggle for the Vote, 1880–1914*

Ana Stevenson

To cite this book review: James Keating, *Distant Sisters: Australasian Women and the International Struggle for the Vote, 1880–1914* by Ana Stevenson, *Journal of Australian, Canadian, and Aotearoa New Zealand Studies* 1, issue 2 (December 2021): 140-141, <https://doi.org/10.52230/JXLG7775>

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

James Keating, *Distant Sisters: Australasian Women and the International Struggle for the Vote, 1880–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 257pp. Hardback. £80.00. ISBN: 978-1-5261-4097-5.

James Keating's book *Distant Sisters: Australasian Women and the International Struggle for the Vote, 1880–1914* delves into the connections that existed between the Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand women's suffrage movements and their European and American compatriots at the turn of the twentieth century. Principally focused around organisational records, this book responds to a rich historiography with new insights born of thorough and widespread archival research. In his first monograph, Keating, a lecturer and tutor at the University of New South Wales, Australia, extends and sometimes even challenges this historiography. Cautioning against overemphasising national identity, *Distant Sisters* highlights the significance of colony and empire for antipodean suffragists.

Beginning with the World's Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in Australasia, Chapter 1 offers a nuanced analysis of Frances Willard's 'Do-Everything' policy. This was a WCTU policy that encompassed women's enfranchisement as a goal, yet its interpretation and application could differ in branches worldwide. An in-depth comparison between branch records in Adelaide and Auckland enables Keating to argue that, whereas temperance and moral reform held greater significance within many other WCTU branches globally, suffrage gained comparatively greater precedence for these Australasian branches. Since Aotearoa New Zealand suffragists largely retreated from international organisations following their enfranchisement in 1893, Chapter 2 focuses on the global connections that Australian women attempted to forge through the International Council of Women and the International Woman Suffrage Alliance in the years before the First World War. A deeper understanding of Australian women's contributions to suffrage internationalism during this period has become possible, Keating claims, due to increasing digitisation across recent years (p. 69). This illuminates not linear engagement, he argues, but rather the tensions that intercolonial identifications created with international suffrage organisations during the Federation era. Changing colonial and imperial boundaries were in tension with Old World nationalisms, and Keating concludes that these vagaries shaped the manner in which the Commonwealth of Australia's enfranchised women could engage with their European and American compatriots.

While many antipodean suffragists maintained warm friendships with each other, Chapter 3 indicates that a more strategic correspondence often dominated when it came to liaising with suffragists further afield. The concept of intimacy, as opposed to the more historiographically established concept of friendship (pp. 100–101), Keating suggests, proves a more useful framework for examining such epistolary networks, especially between colony and metropole. Ultimately, the letters and *cartes de visites* exchanged with suffragists in Europe and the United States were illustrative of Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand suffragists' 'commitment to internationalism' (p.115). A thorough content analysis then enables Keating to chart the shifting fortunes of the Australasian suffrage press in Chapter 4. Parochialism shaped much reportage, with metropolitan matters from Sydney, Melbourne, and Christchurch gaining precedence over news from the more distant colonies of Queensland, Tasmania, and Western Australia. Similarly, publications in Aotearoa New Zealand relied more heavily on Australian news items than vice versa. However, Keating emphasises that these were not single-issue publications; in fact,

suffrage news often appeared alongside articles about marriage, education, economic rights, legislative reform, and temperance (pp.153-156). Chapter 5 interrogates the challenges that antipodean suffragists encountered when engaging in public international and intercolonial speaking tours on behalf of the cause, noting that the different experience of orators offers important insights into what was deemed acceptable for suffragist women in the public sphere prior to the First World War.

Each chapter of *Distant Sisters* reiterates the centrality of such key Australasian suffragists as New South Welshwomen Rose Scott and Louisa Lawson, Victorian Vida Goldstein, Cantabrian Kate Sheppard, and South Australian Catherine Helen Spence. Yet Keating also illuminates the influence and achievements of less prominent suffragists: for example, Māori-speaking Aucklander Annie Schnackenberg; London-based New South Welshwoman Madge Donohoe; Auckland-based Englishwoman Mary Steadman Aldis; and Adelaidean Elizabeth Webb Nicholls. Although Keating acknowledges the racism of many white suffragists in both antipodean and transatlantic networks, this book nonetheless remains centred around the concerns of such white women.

Distant Sisters offers a considered analysis of the fact of geographical distance and its influence upon antipodean women's ability to engage with suffrage internationalism. Keating emphasises that this reality must not be overstated, yet – as the book's title suggests – distance did remain a factor with which antipodean suffragists needed to contend. Not only did geography shape their ability to travel to the northern hemisphere; it could even inhibit their ability to sustain intercolonial suffrage networks across sparsely populated colonies, especially in Australia. In the process, *Distant Sisters* offers new insights into the symbolic potential and missed opportunities of Australasia's enfranchised women on the world's stage.

Ana Stevenson, James Cook University and University of the Free State