

KEYSTROKES PER MINUTE: WOMEN IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE TYPING POOLS

Historian Professor Bettany Hughes says less than 1 per cent of recorded history is about women.

Dr Judith Aitken wants to change that, starting with the oral history of women in New Zealand's public service typing pools.

Decades ago, in the then-State Services Commission, there were two staff members to whom one had to 'suck up to' to survive: the man who controlled the photocopier and the woman who controlled the typing pool.

Like a hospital matron guarding young nurses, the head typist protected her typists. Shamefully attempted bribes, like sharing cigarettes (almost everyone in the pools smoked), failed, unless the head typist favoured you.

Without these women, no ministerial, Cabinet, or commission document would be timely, no near-illegible draft transformed, no secret budget papers readied to rush over to the Finance Minister for late-night review.

Pool typists' work was rarely publicly recognised. It was definitely underpaid and gave new meaning to 'multi-tasking'. Before the advent of individual desktop computers, pool typists were critical to the workings of government.

After the war, a small number of Māori girls from rural areas were recruited into a paternalistic public service, chaperoned in hostels and worked very successfully in various pools.

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In modest homemade clothes, school leavers were often accompanied to the initial interview by their mothers. Generally ignoring their daughters' private ambitions, their



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parents saw government work as safe and appropriately pre-marital. Once employed, the girls' private lives usually centred around activities with work friends. Their personal modesty, lack of self-aggrandisement, and commitment to high-quality work – rarely recognised in status or pay – were striking.

How we worked

A team of four retired typists, a website designer, and a historian collaborated voluntarily with me on the recording project. We received grants from the Ministry of Culture and Heritage and the Public Service Commission. We presented at New Zealand Historical Association conferences, conducted radio interviews, enrolled over 100 women on our website, and released a series of podcasts.

Rachel Brown provided a template for structuring the interviews. "These were very much led by the participants and the interviewer's own experiences. One of the team's early decisions was to fully transcribe each interview. This paid off as the work developed, and we agreed that transcription is an invaluable element in such oral histories," she says.

Meg Melvin's website and podcasts illustrated issues of pervasive sexism, consistently poor pay, and lack of public recognition for women typing in pools.

How we saw the project

The project was named Keystrokes per Minute by Rose Melvin. This is how she recalls the history: "[The typists'] early life histories were often highlighted by their experience of the state education system, which shaped their lives and careers. Along with societal expectations about girls' role in society and parental expectations and ambitions, many were encouraged, sometimes reluctantly, to take commercial courses at school. They entered government typing pools via the commercial streams of high schools and technical colleges. Learning on the job, some progressed through the ranks of typing pools, often moving between government offices or out of the public sector altogether. Some went on to have remarkable careers in fields of their choosing."

A professional typist, Eth Lloyd, former President of the International Administrators Association, was one such woman. She recalls the powerful stories of many unsung women: "It was extraordinary to realise that so many women in this workforce in the 1950s–1970s had little

control over their education and options. Their parents had fixed and limited ideas of the roles girls could fulfil, but truly damning was the education system which did not allow them to develop and grow. All the women took pride in their work, its quality, their personal achievements, how they had made the very best of the expectations of the times and their often limited opportunities.”

“Listening to their stories brought to life the skills and experience of a forgotten group of public servants, of which I was one.” (Maureen Goodwin)

Maureen Goodwin had been a senior member of the Social Welfare staff and her administrative talents were valued – although not in her pay packet. “Listening to their stories brought to life the skills and experience of a forgotten group of public servants, of which I was one.”

Each interview was unique in character. More than one former pool typist commented: “This is the first time anyone has taken any interest in my work.”

Conclusion

Rachel Patrick, a historian, observed that “although their skilled work was central to the day-to-day operation of government departments, for most of the century female office workers were paid less and received fewer opportunities for advancement than their male colleagues.

This important oral history, based on some 60 interviews, captures the voices and experiences of a core group of female government workers in the second half of the twentieth century, a period of rapid social and technological change during which women’s lives and career options were transformed and those typists adapted readily to the changed nature of office work itself.”

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Despite long state sector employment, there is still no history of women in the public service. More have become CEOs, but the story yet to be told is of female receptionists, telephonists, typists, secretaries, policy analysts, clerks, tea



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ladies, and protocol advisers.

Perhaps this could be a chapter in a new book that honours the thousands of women who have been essential for so long to public administration in Aotearoa New Zealand. **PS**

Dr Judith Aitken CNZM, QSO was born and educated in Te Awamutu, Auckland, and four New Zealand universities. She is a former Playcentre supervisor and Polynesian migration centre supervisor, school teacher, lecturer (VUW), TV presenter, editor and newspaper publisher, public servant, local government representative, and farmer. Oral histories she has lodged in national archives and privately include: Women in a Disabling World, Post-War History of Women in the Public Service Typing Pool, The Life and Times of Kitty Hilton, Wellington Citizen, and Bright Sparks: People Who Made the Electricity Corporation of New Zealand. She has written numerous publications on sexism, women, education, politics, and freedom of information.