Catherine Bishop  
*Minding Her Own Business: Colonial Businesswomen in Sydney*  

The introductory chapter of this book is aptly titled ‘Hidden in Plain View’. As the author, historian Catherine Bishop, asserts, self-employed businesswomen were a vital part of colonial society and its economy, yet histories have overlooked their significant contribution. The reason for this not only lies in the way histories have been written, where women, typically situated within the domestic sphere, have been portrayed as secondary players to the men, but also in the difficulties of dealing with the primary documentation.

Laws served to conceal the presence of women in business once they married. Spinsters and widows, regarded legally as ‘feme sole’, could operate businesses on the same legal basis as men. However, once a woman married, her legal status shifted to that of a ‘feme covert’, protected by her husband who had legal responsibility for his wife and ownership and control of all her property and income. As Bishop demonstrates, married women could and did run businesses but they were legally defined as agents of their husbands and could not enter into contracts on their own. This limited married women’s roles as businesswomen and for the historian, conceals their primary involvement in many businesses. Bishop also points out that working women, when they did write letters and journals, rarely commented on their work. Social mores, which emphasised women’s role within the home, contributed to businesswomen’s invisibility. Women mentioned in obituaries or newspaper reports were more often described as being someone’s wife or mother, rather than defined by profession.

*Minding Her Own Business* sits apart from other books about colonial women.

Previous histories of settler and pioneer women have championed the wives of wealthy settlers and governors, such as Elizabeth Macarthur and Anna Josepha King, or well-known women such as philanthropist Caroline Chisholm. These women came from a small and select group in colonial society and left accounts of their lives through letters and journals. An exception is the ex-convict Mary Reiby, who is celebrated for her business acumen, which brought her great wealth in the early years of European settlement. Bishop points out that Reiby is distinguished, not for being a businesswoman (there were many women at the time running businesses), but for her uncommon success and wealth.
In the 1970s and 1980s, feminist histories such as Beverley Kingston’s *My Wife, my Daughter and Poor Mary Ann*, and *Production or Reproduction?: An Economic History of Women in Australia, 1788–1850* (1980) by Katrina Alford investigated the domestic and working lives of mothers and daughters, family members in the home, and women in paid employment such as servants and factory workers. As Bishop points out, even these historians have categorised colonial women’s labour as secondary and supplementary to the primary male earner in the family.

Colonial histories have thus largely overlooked women who were their own bosses. *Minding Her Own Business* offers an alternative view of settler women. It uncovers a whole section of colonial society that has been overlooked by historians and shifts the view of women from secondary earners to primary contributors in the public and economic sphere. Many women, such as Catherine Brown, the licensee of the famed Hero of Waterloo pub in the Rocks, have been written out of history. While her husband Jonathan is celebrated by the hotel today as an early owner, Catherine’s name is absent and her time as sole licensee from the late 1850s to 1861, after Jonathan’s death, is unacknowledged. Yet on the streets of colonial Sydney Bishop shows us that working women were highly visible and an accepted part of daily life. They supplied dresses and bonnets, taught in private schools and ladies’ academies, served up food and drink and provided lodgings.

Bishop’s research reveals a raft of primary earners who provided for themselves and their families. Some worked independently, others worked with their husbands or family members. In *Minding Her Own Business* Bishop places independent working women back onto the streets of colonial Sydney, describing them as important ‘cogs’ in the economic vitality of nineteenth-century Sydney. As small business owners, these women had more control over balancing family and work than waged women, whose rate of pay was based on the premise that their income was secondary.

The types of businesses run by women were wide-ranging, from the expected (dressmakers, milliners, staymakers and midwives) to the unexpected (a plumber, taxidermist and undertaker). In between there are publicans, grocers and general dealers. Free settler women, convicts and ex-convicts, married, unmarried, divorced and deserted wives reflect the range of entrepreneurial women who made their own living in nineteenth century Sydney. Significantly, Bishop notes the absence from the records of non-European and indigenous women in business at this time.
Just as with the many small businesses run by men, some of these businesses flourished and some did not. Some ran for many years and some were short-lived. There are tales of hard working women, such as the butcher’s widow Catherine Bragg, left to provide for five children, who continued in her own right as a butcher for fourteen years after the death of her husband. There are also colourful stories of ‘flighty females’, such as Cora Anna Weekes, whose fraudulent business dealings kept her on the move across America and on to Australia and Calcutta, where she collected subscriptions in advance for a bogus weekly newspaper which never materialised.

Minding Her Own Business opens with two pages of intriguing maps of inner Sydney identifying businesses run by women. This is a powerful visualisation of the range and number of female-owned and operated businesses that Bishop has been able to trace. The book is divided into nine chapters, most of which concentrate on particular groups of trades, including dressmaking, millinery and clothing supplies and boarding houses, brothels and bars. It reveals a web of activity and pieces together fragments of lived lives. We learn of the hardships and dogged tenacity of some women who survived bankruptcy or dealt with impecunious and hapless husbands. We also hear of resourceful businesswomen, such as Esther Bigge, an ex-convict, who saw a need in the market and rented out bathing machines to women, who otherwise were prohibited by law to swim in public. Establishing her business in 1833, Esther was still in charge in 1852 at the age of seventy-seven.

Due to the lack of ‘footprints’ left by many of these women, much of the information that Bishop pieces together is fragmentary. We find for instance that a Miss Kirkwood, who arrived in Sydney in late 1832 and immediately set up a dressmaking business, has married and ceased trading in 1833. She reappears in the records in 1837 when she takes over her deceased husband’s comb making business, sells the stock in 1840 and then leaves for New Zealand where she marries and ‘promptly disappeared from view’. We know nothing more than the bare facts that Kirkwood ran these businesses. Information is thin, presumably because there can be nothing more gleaned from the records. At times this makes for disjointed reading, but Bishop deftly handles the material, making careful inferences from what she has been able to establish, while keeping the reader engaged.

What becomes evident as Bishop unrolls her research is that very little survives materially of these women’s lives. Whereas Anna Josepha King’s (the wife of Governor Philip Gidley
King) journals and letters, and a couple of dresses lovingly kept by descendants (now in the collection of the National Trust of New South Wales) survive, very little is known to have survived of these working women’s lives. An exception are the dressmakers Margaret Doak and Minnie Beattie, a mother and daughter team who joined in business in 1873 to form Doak and Beattie. Examples of their fine work from the 1870s and 1880s survive in the collections of Sydney Living Museums and the National Trust of Australia. From these garments we can ascertain the level of their expertise and design sensibility, delivering high fashion to well-to-do colonial women, both together or individually, for more than sixty years.

_Minding Her Own Business_ is a significant body of research which establishes the rich contribution of Sydney’s colonial businesswomen to the city’s life and economy. They have been restored to plain view and are recognised as primary earners who used their skills and ingenuity, labour and common sense to support themselves and their families, while also contributing economically to the development of the city. Bishop’s work sets the scene for further studies which look beyond Sydney to businesswomen working in other urban and rural centres in colonial Australia. It also heralds an opportunity for focussed research into women working in particular trades and businesses during the nineteenth century.

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**JENNY HOCKING**  
**THE DISMISSAL DOSSIER: EVERYTHING YOU WERE NEVER MEANT TO KNOW ABOUT NOVEMBER 1976**  
(Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2016)  

Jenny Hocking’s research on a singularly important event in Australian political history represents an immensely valuable contribution to both historical scholarship and Australian democracy. Drawing on research from her two-volume biography of Gough Whitlam, Hocking’s book, while small, presents important new insights into the complex sequence of events surrounding the dismissal of the Whitlam government in 1975. Important new facts are combined with crucial but neglected ones to reveal a ‘hidden history’(7). This narrative utilises new material, including the papers of former Governor-General John Kerr, and recently released interviews with former Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser and former Liberal Senate leader Reginald Withers (the architect of the coalition’s strategy of ‘ultimate Senate obstruction’(69) in starving the Whitlam government