

# Reflections on AWEA

## MARGOT ROTH

Interviewed by Jen Margaret in Melbourne, 28 November 2013



Margot Roth has had a lengthy involvement with AWEA. She was particularly active during the 1970s when she and John Colquhoun alternated in the role of president. Margot played a key role in the establishment of women's studies. She has been a prolific writer and her contributions to the *WEA Review* provide a valuable record of AWEA activities. Jen Margaret interviewed Margot in her home in Melbourne.

*Kia ora Margot, can we start with you sharing why you got involved in AWEA and what appealed to you about the organisation?*

Well, my arm was twisted—I think by John Colquhoun—and that would have been in the 1960s. We had moved to Auckland from Wellington and we joined the Auckland Socialist Forum which John was a member of. John saw the possibility of returning the WEA—which had been moribund more or less—to its original roots and growing its membership and making an impact in the way that it was founded for. Because nationally the WEA had become ... okay it was an adult education organisation ... but I don't think it was particularly radical. John was looking to improve its general perspective so he was getting people like me onto the executive. That's as I remember it.

*During the time of your involvement what were the main strengths of the organisation?*

When I joined there was a very good literacy programme and it was successful. It was run by Martin Harrison, who is now, or was, a teacher of creative writing in one of the universities in Sydney. That was a very successful programme. Of course it drew in a lot of people who'd had bad school experiences and so on. It drew in people and made them aware of the WEA.

The other strength of course was women's studies—I'll go back to that in a minute. Also building up more ties with the trade unions. This was how WEA began of course, as a partnership between unions and universities, for unionists who wanted to know more about economics—but there was a quotation from an economics professor who said he learnt more about economics lecturing to the workers in WEA than he ever had before.

We had trade unionists on the executive, I seem to remember, because they were a bit rude about my chairmanship. We supported the unions by marching alongside them under our banner in demonstrations and passed resolutions of support and so on. One of the WEA's summer schools was based round the theme of trade unions. The WEA Executive also adopted the NZ Working Women's Charter as part of its aims. There was probably some follow-on from the Auckland Socialist Forum that John and I came from, because we had produced a pamphlet on civil rights called *Meeting the Police* which had a very wide circulation among the unions.

We also built up ties with iwi. That was important ... building up the organisation as an anti-racist, pro-worker group.

Also, when I first joined we were in Ponsonby Road and then we moved to Princes Street. But then—and this was a strength—we moved from Princes Street to Grey Lynn. Our offices in Princes Street were directly opposite the main university building, and the passing trade, so to speak, were from the academic world. The suburb of Grey Lynn was (then) more of a working-class, multicultural area which was more appropriate for our general aims. Also, we shared the Princes Street building with others who were not our greatest supporters, especially when one of the organisations using AWEA premises for planning meetings and so on was HART (Halt All Racist Tours) when anti-Springbok rugby feeling was at its height.



I'd like to go back to women's studies which is very close to my heart. I'm showing Jen a book called *The United Women's Convention* that took place in 1973. It was sponsored by the WEA and there is an introduction in there that gives you the facts about it. It started off as just a seminar which drew so many women that the WEA agreed that there should be this much wider gathering, the United Women's Convention, in 1973. It was organised by Toni Church, who was later Toni Jeffries.

This was very important because this Convention was so popular—it drew so many women from all over New Zealand—that the next year, 1974, Auckland WEA started Women's Studies courses. There was a pioneer academic, Rosemary Seymour, who started women's studies in continuing education at Waikato University. Universities were very anti women's studies because they were interdisciplinary; they used women as central focus and they weren't nice! Auckland was the last of the universities to take in women's studies so by default the WEA and its Women's Studies courses became the centre of Auckland's women's studies.

We were very well served to begin with by Kaye Green, who became the tutor-organiser at the Auckland WEA because she had an anthropological background, and Claire-Louise McCurdy was one of the tutors. She began as a student and became a tutor—she was a

tutor for many years. We produced the *Women's Studies in New Zealand Handbook* in 1985 and got an award from the Public Service Association. The Women's Studies Association held conferences and we set up a women's studies subcommittee at the WEA. Candis Craven, who was the main organiser of that handbook, designed a women's studies kit, distributed it at a Women's Studies Conference and asked for feedback from people who used it. She got lots of feedback and changes were incorporated into that handbook.

This was a very important part of Auckland WEA because the Women's Studies courses were financially very good—they made a profit I think. And because we were outside academia, if a course wasn't right we could just abolish it. We went on to develop Lesbian Studies. At that time, in the late 1970s and 80s, there were a lot of assertiveness training courses and people who came to WEA were anxious for us to put one on. Well, four of us went to other people's assertiveness courses and we were not impressed. There was such a demand for them that we made our own, and that translated into lesbian assertiveness training and so on.

There was a genealogy, an oral history course, and that also had a lesbian section. I remember that in the brochure. Pat Rosier drew up the lesbian one and she put a little note in that students should note that assertiveness training will not necessarily give you what you want ... words to that effect. We also had Ripeka Evans who gave Economics for Māori Women and she had one class just for Māori or Pacific Island women and another for everybody. That went quite well too.

All this was happening but it was Women's Studies in particular that built up the WEA—it became the Auckland centre really for women's studies. So this was one of the strengths—apart from the literacy course. We were also involved with the trade union correspondence course—I remember I wrote a bit about the history of New Zealand women which was probably madly inaccurate because I'm not a historian.

*Were people coming for one class then attending others? Or did different areas have different groups of people that they attracted?*

I think with Women's Studies they would go to different classes but you see I don't remember what else we were offering—which shows how prejudiced I am.

*You said that women's studies was a good money earner—how were the Women's Studies courses funded? Did you get funding from the government?*

Yes, the WEA got government money so that paid for a tutor-organiser and there were fees for the classes. So far as I remember there was an alternative for people who couldn't or wouldn't pay. But I remember that they were definitely a source of income. I can't remember exactly what the financial arrangements were, but they were never enough.

*You mentioned that part of the advantage or the strength of the organisation was the agility and flexibility that it had to explore new areas—to develop a course and drop something else if it wasn't working...*

Oh absolutely. Our strength was we did argue the toss a lot. We tried to work collectively which can be hard, but we did try to work as a group. The *Women's Studies Handbook* is one

result. It didn't come just from our subcommittee, it came from input from the people who tried out the kit in the first place—so we did very much try to work collectively.

I remember one time somebody asked if I would give a workshop with her for lesbians about tracing your family ancestry. I said okay I would, but I didn't think the lesbians would want me who is not a lesbian. She said, 'No, no that will be alright,' but she came back to me very apologetic and said, no, they wouldn't have me. I was fine with that but I think that's an example of how we tried to measure the skills we had with what the recipients wanted—because I thought it was quite appropriate that they didn't want me.

I remember one of the things we did do with that going back to find your family background was that we altered the questions a bit for women so that we had a more informative outcome. We tinkered with the original and made it for women. I remember that one of the things we added was a question, 'Who brought you up?' which wasn't in the original thing.

We always encouraged evaluation and feedback and so on and then tried to incorporate it.

*And you had that negotiated process with the people you were working with about how workshops would happen.*

*Going back to women's studies, the courses grew and flourished within WEA—at what stage did things get picked up by the university and did the courses move from WEA?*

Well, it had moved in a way to university through Continuing Education. I think going into universities ultimately was its downfall because you had some marvellous women battling to maintain a feminist approach. They were overworked because the Women's Studies classes became so popular and they didn't get any more resources; they were under-resourced, complained about, and because they were interdisciplinary very threatening to university hierarchy who like to keep their territory to themselves. Then of course women's studies was changed in name to gender studies because 'What's the point of women's studies?'

I don't know really, I've been away from New Zealand for a long time now and I haven't kept up but it seems to me that women's studies were built on a very solid foundation outside the universities: there was the Dunedin Women's Collective, which began in 1971 and expanded into all sorts of wonderful areas. I think that the strength of the early women's studies lay in the scholarship of the women who began women's studies who were not necessarily academics at all. So nationally there was a very solid foundation and this was particularly so in Auckland where we managed to escape the university for longer than in other places. Then the universities made it so that women's studies were not anything worthwhile unless they came out of the universities. This is a very simplistic generalisation I have to add, but this is the way it seemed.

*Did that have an impact on the AWEA classes?*

It must have, yes, and by that time the economy was getting worse, so that people wanted to know, 'Is this course going to get me a job?' Well, actually, most courses didn't necessarily get them a job but you couldn't say that women's studies was a good occupational background. It was really but not for employers.

*Should we move on to the question about some of the challenges? We've been talking about the strengths I'm sure they can't have been without some challenges which you have just alluded to.*

You name it. Well, there was a challenge from the Auckland WEA executive who didn't like the notion of women's studies. We had to fight to get permission from the executive to exclude men from women's studies unless the tutor said a man could come in. One very long-standing member of WEA resigned in a huff because he said this was 'undemocratic and ladies' apartheid.' So that was a challenge. And we had the same kind of thing with Ripeka's economics for Māori and Pacific Island Women. So we pointed out that she had a separate course for all women, but that was another challenge.

*So was the notion of having parallel courses for men and women or Māori and non-Māori prevalent at that stage or not really?*

No it wasn't, not at all.

*So what you were doing in AWEA was groundbreaking in terms of that approach?*

Yes, I suppose it was really, but it was a challenge.

*Did every course have to get approved by the executive?*

Yes, which was necessary really because if the Hare Krishna or somebody wanted to run a course I would have objected. Also I think it was part of the notion of collectivity that the executive needed to know what was going on even if they weren't especially interested. But it was the separation of the genders and the ethnicity that got them.

*Was there an effort to have a gender balance or inclusion of Māori and Pacific peoples and others on the executive?*

I remember this was a challenge and I always remember the 'ladies' apartheid.'

We were also challenged by the national executive. There were separate WEAs all over the place and a national executive. There was a conference every year—a national conference. Now in those days, 1970s–1980s, any national conference regarded Auckland with great suspicion because the perception was that Auckland was brash and commercial, and kind of not as cultured as other centres. I remember my father told me that as a lawyer he could conclude a deal on a handshake in Dunedin or Christchurch, mostly in Wellington, but he never would in Auckland, he would require it to be written. And my father was a very tolerant man. The undertone was that there was corruption because it was brash—well of course it was the biggest city then. So Auckland WEA had all that to contend with and there was absolute horror at the idea of women's studies—that wasn't of interest at all until they got a new secretary who brandished the handbook and said why weren't they selling it. They were a bit of a trial, the national executive, because Auckland became more radical, as I think John Colquhoun wanted.

And then Education Department ... they funded us and the Education Department regarded the WEA as very small potatoes. We kept asking for stuff and they'd say, 'Oh it's in the pipeline.' That pipeline must have been so stuffed nothing came out the other end. I remember John Bensemman and I drew up a little research plan—we were very careful we

confined it to one page and made it as simple as possible—and sent it off. I don't think we ever got any reply. There was also the National Council of Education, but I can't remember exactly what WEAs' relationship was with it. I recall them as nice people but not terribly relevant to our activities.

Anyway, we did have lots challenges all over the place. I think it was largely because Auckland was sticking to its radical roots as far as it could. John Colquhoun got mentioned in Parliament as a communist as I recall. He was a very good leader—he'd tend to go to sleep in meetings and then suddenly wake up at a very pertinent point. John was very good at negotiating and sticking to a principle and I think this is what made us unpopular. I think anybody who gave an analysis of what the Education Department or the National Council was doing wasn't very popular, and I could do that because I could write and I wasn't subject to anybody.

So there were a lot of challenges, but we managed.

*Did the radical focus of Auckland WEA put it at odds with the other WEAs during the time of your involvement? You were talking about that being part of the tension with the national executive.*

West Auckland had a separate WEA and they were fine. In fact, they were very good in some of the things they were doing. Dorothy McGray was excellent. But I don't think the other WEAs were terribly interested in what we were doing. After all each WEA was independent and responded to its own environment. I think in Christchurch that they were more closely tied to the university than we ever were. I don't think the trade union links were as strong in other WEAs—but I could be wrong on that. I would say that nationally Auckland WEA got the kind of flack that most other Auckland organisations got, from a national point of view, because of Auckland's reputation. As my mother put it, 'In Christchurch the cream rises to the top, in Auckland it's the scum.' I'm just quoting the way I was brought up. So that made a big difference. And of course the national executive never had enough resources.

*What were some of the most memorable or significant moments of your involvement in the organisation? Are there any particular stories or times that stand out for you?*

I think partly it was the interesting conversations in the office when Kaye Green and Martin Harrison, our literacy fellow, were there—the conversations about philosophy, education and all the rest—that was good. I was very admiring of Pat Rosier, a very good tutor and a very clear thinker—I was very pleased to be associated with her. But I don't remember—it was all so busy because I was doing WEA; I was doing sociology; I was doing family and so on; so it becomes an unmerciful blur. But yes, I admired what other people were doing.

Kaye Green, who was then the tutor-organiser, organised a summer school where she gave the history of Māori in New Zealand which was absolutely brilliant. I don't know quite where she went but I do think she deserves a lot of credit for her experience; her introduction to, and her knowledge of women's studies; her anthropological background; and particularly her summer school account of Māori history in New Zealand.

*Do you have any reflections on what contribution AWEA has made to social change in Aotearoa? We've already talked about women's studies but more broadly?*

I think the fact that as adult educators we tried not to be elitist—that was the biggest thing. The literacy programme, the trade union education postal service and women's studies all established that adult education is for everybody and not just the top lot. I think the lesbian part of the women's studies was really important, just the same as Ripeka's contribution was important.

*You mentioned John's focus on rebuilding the organisation as an anti-racist, pro-worker organisation and there being the focus on women's studies at the same time. What was happening in AWEA before that revived energy?*

I think nothing much.

*There was a bit of a hiatus?*

I think so. My impression is that it was like the other WEAs—not doing very much or nothing very radical.

*Do you have memories around relationships with Māori at the time of your involvement and the energy that went into establishing or building them?*

I just remember leaving it to Ripeka and I think John Bensemman, who was tutor-organiser then. I didn't have an awful lot to do with the actual organising or anything. I knew Ripeka and she was the one I built up the relationship with.

There was a big education conference when Bill Renwick was the Director of Education in the 1970s or 1980s and the national WEA person who was going couldn't go and I went in her place. At that conference they had organised groups for pre-school, primary and so on, and they'd left out Māori and Pacific Island groups which Merimeri Penfold pointed out. She gathered Māori and Pacific Islanders and because I was from the WEA, who had the links, she got me into their group as well. Now that was a huge compliment—it really was. I mean it wasn't a compliment to me but to the Auckland WEA. I think that was quite significant at the time.

It was interesting in that at that time the conference organisers, who were very good and very capable, had made no place for Māori and Pacific Islanders. So they made their own and it was a very interesting conference. I think it was a sign of what Auckland WEA had accomplished in a small way—that invitation to join the group. I was the only Pākehā in it as I remember. As I say this wasn't personal, it was the WEA.

I think I was very much the beneficiary of being with the WEA—I learnt such a lot. Obviously the principles of social justice, equality and feminism were reinforced for me and have stayed with me. Whether I've been able to act on them or not I don't know, but those principles have been very important for me.