



**(1871-1962)**

The New Zealand-born Allan was the first female parliamentary reporter in Australasia and one of three women foundation members of the Australian Journalists' Association. She survived a ban by the all-male Parliamentary Press Gallery in Wellington to become one of the most influential female journalists in Australia after she moved to Melbourne and edited the women's pages of *The Argus* for three decades until 1938. She pioneered the development of women's pages, attracting readers and advertisers with a mix of domestic topics and community welfare issues. She requested letters from readers seeking advice and they came in their thousands, establishing a standard feature in women's pages and magazines.

*Stella  
Allan*

By *PATRICIA CLARKE*

A feminist and socialist in her youth in New Zealand, Stella Allan became a revered establishment figure during her long journalistic career as “Vesta” on the *Argus*.

Born Stella May Henderson in 1871 in Kaiapoi on New Zealand’s South Island, the seventh of nine children, she was a brilliant student. After winning a university scholarship from Christchurch Girls’ High School, she graduated Bachelor of Arts with first class honours in 1892 and Master of Arts the following year. While working for a Christchurch law firm she studied law.

Stella grew up in frugal circumstances in a family with strict Presbyterian beliefs. Like several of her sisters she became an active feminist and socialist, campaigning against restrictions on women’s political, educational and employment rights. A member of Christchurch Socialist Club, she made news as the first female soapbox orator when she spoke at an open air socialist rally on the Wellington wharves.

After she qualified as a lawyer the New Zealand Parliament passed special legislation to allow her to practise but, instead, she accepted the offer of a prized position as parliamentary correspondent to report the national parliament in Wellington for the *Lyttelton Times*. The all-male press gallery voted against her admission but she improvised by taking notes from the ladies gallery and writing her dispatches and leaders in the ladies tea room. As the first female parliamentary reporter in Australasia, she became

well-known for her fight for gender equality.

In 1900 Stella married Edwin Frank Allan, a leader writer on the conservative *Wellington Evening Post*, formerly a diplomat in the British Embassy in Peking. When Edwin Allan was offered a position as leader writer on *The Argus* in 1903, the Allan family moved to Melbourne.

Within a week of her arrival, Stella Allan was asked to write for *The Argus* and soon she was a highly valued regular contributor. In 1908, by then the mother of four daughters, she was appointed to the journalistic staff to write and edit the *Argus*’s women’s section. Her regular “Women to Women” feature, signed ‘Vesta’, remained a feature of *The Argus* for the next thirty years. At first her single column appeared only weekly but, within a few years, it had expanded to several columns and later the women’s section covered four pages daily, its expansion underwritten by greatly increased readership and advertising revenue.

Vesta’s columns covered domestic topics and community welfare issues but probably the feature that many women readers valued most were the knowledgeable, common sense replies to those seeking information, advice and help and the opportunity to express their opinions. This tapped into a previously almost silent readership and resulted in an avalanche of letters, requiring the *Argus* to employ extra staff. The technique of involving readers became standard in women’s pages journalism but at the time it was innovative.

Apart from her strong involvement with her readers, the other feature of Vesta’s columns was



*Stella May Allan (nee Henderson), above left, achieved unusual academic distinction gaining a BA with a special focus on political science and an MA with first-class honours in English and Latin, and completing the requirements for a Bachelor of Laws during the 1890s. She is shown in 1892 at her BA graduation. Stella (above top right) is pictured with her daughters (from left) Helen Mary, Frances Elizabeth, Stella Patricia Grace and Alice Margaret. Stella, above bottom right on the left, with her sisters Kathleen and Elizabeth Henderson in 1890.*

Clarke

her conservative, confined choice of subjects, far removed from her radical youth and her own pioneering career choices. Like much women's page journalism of the era, her section skirted difficult social problems, aiming primarily at the interests of traditional middle-class housewives. Allan's even modified her view on the key feminist goal of female suffrage. In 1917 she blamed universal suffrage and the failure of universal education for the defeat of World War I conscription referendums.

A friend of Pattie Deakin, Stella Allan became a prominent figure in Melbourne life. She was a president of the Victorian Women's Writers' Club and later of the Lyceum Club, with which it merged, and a foundation member of the Australian Journalists' Association. In the 1920s she was a substitute Australian delegate to the League of Nations

in Geneva and in 1930 a delegate to the Pacific Women's conference in Hawaii.

In 1938, to mark the end of her third decade on *The Argus*, representatives of more than thirty Victorian women's organisations gathered in the Melbourne Town Hall in a remarkable tribute. She had "created a new field of newspaper journalism directed especially to meet the needs of women in their personal and domestic lives, and to stimulate and encourage interest and responsibilities outside the home, in matters of public concern", her journalist daughter, Patricia Keep, wrote.

The following year Stella Allan retired but she continued to contribute to the *Argus*. During World War II she reported from England on the experiences of women and children. In 1947 she returned to Melbourne where she died on 1 March 1962 at the age of 90.

Further Reading:

'The transformation of Stella Allan: Soapbox socialist to conservative women's page editor', **Patricia Clarke** *Australian Journalism Review*, Vol. 33(2), Dec 2011.

*Pen Portraits: Women Writers and Journalists in Nineteenth-Century Australia*, **Patricia Clarke**, Allen & Unwin, 1988.

'Allan, Stella May (1871-1962)', **Patricia Keep**, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Melbourne University Press, Vol. 7, 1979.

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