

The transformation of journalist Stella Allan

Soap-box socialist to conservative women's page editor

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This article examines the influences that transformed a young New Zealand journalist Stella Allan (1871-1962) from a committed socialist and feminist to a conservative, establishment figure who edited the women's pages of the Melbourne *Argus* for three decades. It considers the stultifying effects of women's page journalism and the influence of a notably conservative paper on her social and political views. It also uncovers biographical information pointing to the social and gender pressures at the beginning of the twentieth century that led her to conform to the conservative views of her husband, an Oxford-educated former Foreign Office diplomat.

Stella Allan's journalistic career began spectacularly in New Zealand when male journalists refused her entry to the parliamentary press gallery in Wellington, although the main achievement of her long and distinguished journalistic life was as 'Vesta' on the Melbourne *Argus* from 1908 to 1938. She was born Stella May Henderson on 25 October 1871 at Kaiapoi, a town about 17 km north of Christchurch in the Canterbury region of the South Island of New Zealand, the seventh of nine children of Daniel Henderson, born in Wick, Caithness on the north-eastern coast of Scotland, and his wife Alice (nee Conolly), a native of Adare, County Limerick in the south-west of Ireland. Her father, a great admirer of Dean Swift's writing, gave her the name of Stella to honour Swift's book *A Journal to Stella*. Her mother added May for 'a fine bush' of pure white may blooming in the garden at the time of her daughter's birth (Allan, n.d.). Her parents had married on 29 August 1859 in Albury, New South Wales (NSW Marriages, No. 1159) where Daniel Henderson was a draper and Alice Conolly a clerk. Their first child, Alice Elinor, was born at Albury in 1860 and their second, Christina Kirk, in 1861 at Emerald Hill, Melbourne. A few years later the family moved to

Auckland, New Zealand. By the late 1860s they were living at Kaiapoi where Daniel Henderson ran a store, then at Ashburton, on the Canterbury Plains, 86 km south of Christchurch. Stella's education began at Ashburton school where from 1878 her two eldest sisters, Alice and Christina, were pupil teachers. When she was 11 the family moved to Christchurch to give the younger children better educational opportunities. At 12 she gained a scholarship to Christchurch Girls' High School where from 1886 her sister Christina taught Latin and English under the principal, Helen Connan, a pioneer in the education of women in New Zealand and one of the first women graduates in the British Empire (Allan, 1958a). In 1888, at the age of 17, Stella won a junior scholarship to Canterbury College, one of the four colleges constituting the University of New Zealand. She completed a BA in 1892 and was awarded a college exhibition for excellence in honours work in political science. The following year she gained an MA with first class honours in English and Latin. While studying at university she taught cookery at Christchurch Girls' High and cooking remained a lifetime interest.

The Henderson children grew up in a family with strict Presbyterian beliefs – the eldest daughter, Alice, was a missionary in India for forty years – and in frugal circumstances, particularly after the death of Daniel Henderson in 1886. Several of seven girls in the family became active feminists and socialists. Christina viewed capitalism as cruel and unjust especially to 'the weak, disorganised masses' of women workers who earned only a fraction of the pay of male workers doing equal work (Sargison, 2007). Stella and her younger sister, Elizabeth, joined Christina as members of a Christchurch socialist club, known as the Socialist Church, and all three were on the committee of the Progressive Liberal Association, one of whose goals was the removal of political and civil discrimination against women. In 1898 Stella was selected as the Association's delegate to the annual conference of the New Zealand National Council of Women in Wellington where she gave a paper on local

government reform. While in Wellington she spoke on 'Municipal Socialism' at a socialist rally held near the wharves. Described as 'the first woman to address an open air meeting in New Zealand on a social and political subject', she attracted a 'numerous and sympathetic audience' despite showery weather (Wellington News, 1898, 16 May). Later that month at a meeting of the Christchurch Socialist Church she supported the 'sweeping away of the capitalistic system as it now prevails' and she moved a motion urging the immediate appointment of a judge for the Arbitration Court. The meeting concluded with the singing of 'some Socialistic battle hymns' (Meetings of societies, 1898, 27 May). The following month she spoke at the Canterbury Women's Institute on the need to remove civil and political discrimination against women and in various other forums she advocated the removal of restrictions on the education, employment and freedom of women. She campaigned for the extension of universal suffrage to local government elections; for all women and men to be eligible to stand for election and for public ownership of community services (Broadbent, 2007).

Parliamentary reporter

After graduating Master of Arts in 1893, Stella Henderson worked in a Christchurch law firm, Izard and Loughnan, and studied law although women were not eligible to practise. Her employer, William Izard, lobbied for a private member's bill to be introduced into the New Zealand Parliament to allow women to be admitted as barristers and solicitors and in 1896 the Female Law Practitioners Act was passed. Stella finished her law degree soon after but before she was admitted to the bar, Samuel Saunders, the editor of the liberal Christchurch daily, the *Lyttelton Times*, offered her the position of parliamentary correspondent and political leader writer to report the national parliament in Wellington. First published in 1851 soon after the arrival of European settlers, the *Lyttelton Times* moved to Christchurch in 1863 but retained the name of the port of Lyttelton until it was renamed the *Christchurch Times* in

1929. It was one of the principal papers in the Canterbury region until it ceased publication in 1935.

Stella described Saunders' approach as 'the most wonderful offer ever made to an untrained journalist': it meant a seat in the Press Gallery in the New Zealand parliament 'one of the prizes of the profession'. Many of the press gallery journalists, however, 'were furiously angry that a woman should try to invade this "holy of holies"' (Allan, 1958b). When Saunders wrote to the president of the Press Gallery asking that the *Lyttelton Times*' seat to be allotted to Stella Henderson, they voted 11 to 4 against her admission (Women parliamentary reporters, 1898, 16 August). They claimed that a female would need separate working accommodation and a special 'retiring room' but it is clear from a contemporary press report that the real objection was the fear that women, entering a previously all-male section of the profession, would lead to lower wage rates as had occurred in several other occupations (Ladies as reporters, 1898, 3 September). New Zealand newspaper editors joined Saunders in a letter to the Speaker of the House stating that they would not be dictated to on their choice of journalist and must be free to appoint the ablest person. The Speaker referred the dispute to the Reporting Debates and Printing Committee of the House.

In the meantime Stella took notes of parliamentary proceedings from a seat in the ladies gallery balancing a notebook on her knees and wrote her dispatches and leaders in the ladies tea room as other women chatted around her. The dispute was 'resolved' by the erection of a partition providing a special cubicle for her use (Allan, 1958b). Stella became 'well-known throughout the colony' for her fight for gender equality (All sorts of people, 1902, 6 September) and the Christchurch *Star* reported that her battle on behalf of women reporters had 'furnished the London papers with quite a nice supply of copy' (Personal and general, 1898, 9 December). For the next two years Stella Henderson continued in this ground-breaking job as the first female parliamentary reporter in either New Zealand or Australia.

She also continued her involvement with the National Council of Women and many organisations speaking on diverse subjects including neglected children, temperance and federation.

Marriage to E.F. Allan

During her second year as parliamentary reporter she became engaged to Edwin Frank Allan, a leader writer on the Wellington *Evening Post*, at that time the leading New Zealand newspaper. Unlike the liberal *Lyttelton Times* the *Post* supported conservative policies and this created problems in their relationship. Stella wrote that, after their engagement was announced, Edwin Allan ‘made a point of ignoring’ her, bypassing her in the corridors of parliament without acknowledging her, to reinforce the opposing political agendas of their papers. ‘The difference in his attitude was most pronounced’, she wrote. ‘So I realised that it “would not work” for husband and wife to support different parties in politics’ (Allan, 1958b). Stella resigned from her hard-won position with the *Lyttelton Times*, incurring the fury of Sam Saunders who had fought for her right to break through the gender barrier. Her decision is an indication of the force of psychological and social pressures to conform to the prevailing norm of male dominance in marriage which were felt even by a woman who had forged extraordinary independence in her professional life.

On 6 March 1900, Stella Henderson, aged 28, and Edwin Frank Allan, 32, were married in Christchurch. Born in Stockwell, London, the youngest son of Frank Allan, a tea merchant of Dumford Manor farm, Sussex, Allan was an outstanding student at Westminster School and at Oxford University. Probably because of his father’s trading connections in the Far East he developed an interest in Asia and after travelling in Europe he joined the British foreign service and in 1891 was posted to the British Embassy in Peking. Five years later he became ill with septic malaria and following a breakdown in health he resigned his position and

moved to New Zealand to recuperate. Although he made a partial recovery he did not regain robust health (Death of Mr E. F. Allan, 1922, 3 February). In Wellington his knowledge of international affairs attracted the interest of the editor of the *Evening Post*, Gresley Lukin, a former managing editor of the *Brisbane Courier* and the *Queenslander*, who offered him the position of senior leader writer and he quickly established a reputation as ‘one of the best-informed ablest journalists in the colony’ (All sorts of people, 1903, 11 July). After her marriage Stella continued to be involved in many organisations and to speak on many subjects. She became vice president and honorary solicitor for Society for the Protection of the Women and Children; she was elected a member of the Charitable Aid Board and she was nominated for a seat on the Victoria College Council. A newspaper report, however, described her as a ‘women’s righter whose identity has been swallowed up in marriage’, when she spoke on temperance reform (All sorts of people, 1901, 30 March). Her younger sister, Elizabeth McCombs, under no similar pressure remained a committed socialist and became the first woman member of the New Zealand parliament when she was elected a Labour member (Garner, 2007).

As the Boxer Rebellion unfolded in China and foreign embassies in Peking were besieged, Edwin Allan’s Chinese expertise became increasingly valuable. He was inundated with requests for articles on China from editors in Australia as well as New Zealand eager to tap his intimate knowledge of the country and the identities involved in the crisis. This culminated in the editor of the Melbourne *Argus* visiting Wellington to offer him a position as leader writer on the paper. The prospect of a move to Melbourne presented another disruptive crisis for Stella who, after her marriage, had become New Zealand correspondent for the *Brisbane Courier* and for an unspecified ‘leading London paper’ (All sorts of people, 1901, 7 December) and who planned to begin a legal practice with her husband who was completing legal qualifications in Wellington. She was already being identified in several

newspaper reports as the first female lawyer to begin practise in New Zealand. Nevertheless the offer from the prestigious Melbourne *Argus*, the ‘Mecca’ of journalists, was difficult to resist. Stella described her dilemma as ‘a cruel one’ but she decided to support her husband as she felt she could not stand in the way of ‘the ablest man I had ever met’ (Allan, 1958 b).

Journalist on the *Argus*

The Allans and their first child, Alice, born in December 1902, sailed for Melbourne on the *Monowai* in September 1903. In Melbourne, Stella Allan with her journalistic experience and her legal qualifications was welcomed by women interested in intellectual, social and philanthropic organisations. She became a friend of Pattie Deakin, the Prime Minister’s wife, who was a leader in several organisations particularly some concerned with the needs of children, and of Dr Constance Ellis, a prominent medical practitioner and honorary pathologist at Queen Victoria Hospital for women, who became godmother to one of the Allans’ children. She was soon prominent in women’s organisations, following the novelist Ada Cambridge as the second president of the Victorian Women Writers’ Club and like Mrs Deakin she became a president of the Lyceum Club, a club for women of achievement with which the Writers’ Club merged. When the Australian Journalists’ Association was formed in 1910 she was a foundation member.

Stella Allan’s journalistic career was settled within a week of her arrival in Melbourne when she was asked to write a sub-leader for the *Argus*. Although she claimed this made her the first woman to contribute to its leader columns, Florence Blair (Baverstock) had contributed *Argus* leaders in the 1890s (Wigmore, 1977, 103). Stella described the subject matter of her first contribution as trifling but although she wrote many leaders later none gave her ‘quite such a thrill’ (Allan, 1958b). Some months later she was asked to contribute a regular weekly book review column as well as special articles: her first ‘Fiction of the Day’ column appeared

in April 1904 (Smith, 1925). In 1907 after she had been involved with Mrs Deakin and other prominent women in organising the first Australian Exhibition of Women's Work, held at the Melbourne Exhibition Building, the managing director of the *Argus* commissioned her to write a series on the individual exhibits. Her articles began in mid-October in the build-up to the opening on 23 October 1907 and continued almost daily until the exhibition closed at the end of November. Her coverage was so successful she was engaged to contribute a regular Wednesday women's feature.

In May 1908, by then the mother of four daughters, she was appointed to the journalistic staff to write and edit a women's section for the *Argus* and its weekly associate, the *Australasian*. Her regular 'Women to Women' feature, signed 'Vesta' (Roman goddess of hearth and household), was to be a feature of the *Argus* for thirty years. At first her single column appeared only weekly, but within a few years it had expanded to several columns and later it covered four pages daily. When she had been at the paper for fifteen years, Stella Allan's title was 'Social Editress' and she had a staff of five women journalists including her daughter Patricia (Clarke, 2007, 20). The expansion of Vesta's column to several pages, an endorsement of the fact that she was attracting large numbers of readers, was underwritten by increasing numbers of advertisements. The British press baron, Lord Northcliffe, noted this causal effect in an address in 1912: '... the coming of the woman writer in her hundreds has brought the woman reader in her millions; and the coming of the woman reader has developed the advertiser, upon whom all of us journalists, however lofty we may think ourselves, depend for our existence' (Work of women journalists, 1913, 18). 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 inquirers seeking information, advice and help. Although the subject of Stella Allan's first column – domestic service – was unexceptional, she included the innovative approach of

inviting letters from readers. This tapped into a previously almost silent readership and the result was an avalanche of letters. Her technique of involving readers became standard in women's pages and magazines but at the time it was unusual if not unique. Her correspondence grew to such vast proportions that the *Argus* provided extra staff to help with replies (Keep, 1976, 6).

Conservatism of the *Argus*

Apart from her strong involvement with her readers, the other feature of Vesta's columns was her conservative, confined choice of subjects far removed from her radical youth and her own pioneering career choices. At most there is limited advocacy for reforms of a moderately forward looking kind, such as the provision of creches and kindergartens. Her choice of subjects and the opinions she expressed were influenced by the fact that she was writing for an extremely conservative paper. As Dunstan wrote (2001, 31, 34-5) the *Argus*, until the ownership changed in the last years of its existence, maintained a 'conservative and establishment-oriented political and cultural stance'. It was part of 'the establishment' and put the views of 'establishment interests, that is, the wealthy'. For nearly 40 years from 1888 it was controlled by Sir Lauchlan Mackinnon, a key Victorian establishment figure who maintained the paper as a rigidly conservative organ. Stella's husband, as a senior leader writer, was closely allied with the views of the *Argus* hierarchy and Vesta's columns conformed. An examination of the treatment of the conscription issue in World War I, for example, indicates her strident support for the paper's strong backing for conscription. The defeat of the first conscription referendum, held on 28 October 1916, seemed beyond her comprehension – it was a failure of voters, she believed, 'to face the problem before them in the true spirit of citizenship'. She put this down to a failure of education: 'A sufficient time has not elapsed, since free compulsory education became the order of the day, to secure what we are pleased to call an educated electorate' (Vesta, 1916, 15 November). She was more

strident still in the lead-up to the second referendum held on 20 December 1917 vehemently attacking arguments for the no case.

It is more surprising to find her modifying her views on such a key feminist goal as female suffrage. In 1917, commenting on a report of a British commission on electoral reform, which recommended only very limited female suffrage, she wrote: 'I began by being a keen suffragist, and with high hopes of what women's suffrage might accomplish ... We cannot point to any good that it has accomplished. ... I think [universal women's suffrage] has proved a mistake in Australia...a large proportion of our women are incapable of voting intelligently'. She advised the British that to 'double the number of ignorant voters by granting the suffrage at once to all women would be an irretrievable mistake'. She blamed universal suffrage and the failure of universal education for the defeat of Australia's World War I conscription referendums: 'I have no hesitation in saying that universal suffrage in Australia is responsible for our failure to do our full duty in the war, our extravagant way of running the country, [and] the absorption of our politicians in party conflicts and intrigues, when the safety of the Empire is at stake'(Vesta, 1917,14 February).

Stella Allan's writing appeared in the *Argus* less during 1921 at a time when her husband was becoming increasingly affected by a progressive disease restricting his mobility, from which he suffered for 12 years although he continued to work at the *Argus* until the end of the World War I. He died on 1February 1922 of loco-motor ataxia (Victorian Deaths, No. 1823). Many high-ranking members of the management and literary staff of the *Argus* and prominent public figures were present at his funeral at Brighton Cemetery, a tribute not only to Edwin Allan but to his widow who was left with four daughters Alice, 19, Patricia, 17, Elizabeth, 16 and Helen, 14. Pall bearers included the chairman of the *Argus* and *Australasian*, Sir Lauchlan Mackinnon, the Secretary of the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department,

Sir Robert Garran and the editor of the *Argus*, Dr E H Cunningham (Death, 1922, 4 February).

In the following years Stella Allan became a public figure. In 1924 she was appointed by the Prime Minister, S M Bruce, as a substitute delegate to the League of Nations conference in Geneva (Mrs Allen (sic) MA LLB, 1924, November). On her return she expressed concern that Australia's right to keep a huge continent for six million people would be challenged by the 'starving, homeless millions' in other countries (League of Nations, 1925, 7 March). In 1930 she was a delegate to the Pan Pacific Women's conference in Hawaii. In 1938, to mark the end of her third decade on the *Argus*, Victorian women's organisations held a meeting in the Melbourne Town Hall to thank her for her work for the community and especially for women and children (Tribute to woman journalist, 1938, 3 May). Her daughter wrote that Stella Allan 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' (Keep, 1976).

Women's Page journalism

Apart from the conservative influence of the Melbourne *Argus*, another influence in eradicating the radical stance of Stella Allan's early years was the stifling effect of women's page journalism. The earliest women writers on newspapers, although few in number, were employed in all aspects of journalism. Even as late as 1891, an article in the *Illustrated Sydney News* stated that women employed on newspapers, were 'doing widely varied ... arduous, journalistic work' with a facility 'for putting pen to any and every topic under the sun, that may happen to crop up and absorb, for the moment, the attention or curiosity of the news reading public' (Some Australian women, 1891, 11 April). The pioneer feminist, social reformer and writer, Catherine Spence, when she visited America in 1894, was proud to be

writing on general topics for Australian newspapers, in contrast to American women journalists who, she found, were confined to women's page journalism (Spence, 1910, 56). Her experience, however, was not by then typical of Australian women journalists.

The situation of women employed on newspapers changed in the latter part of the nineteenth century when Australian periodicals and newspapers began to publish articles and items aimed at women readers. At first these columns comprised pieces culled from other sources, such as books of recipes or overseas newspapers, and editors saw no necessity to employ women journalists to cobble them together. Once newspapers and periodicals began printing local news for and about women, however, women were employed to write and edit these pages opening a larger and more regular, although still small, avenue of employment to women journalists. Although an advance in terms of employment, this proved a backward step for their involvement in general reporting (Clarke, 1988, 203-4). Soon almost all women journalists were confined to the narrow field of what were regarded as women's topics, many to the social columns, described graphically in a *Bulletin* note as the 'deadly, dreary ruck of long dress reports and the lists of those who "also ran" at miscellaneous functions' (1912, 30 May). Women journalists were not the only losers in this situation for what they wrote tended to reinforce complacency in their women readers and to shield them from issues of wider significance. Their output was angled at the supposed interests of the traditional middle-class stay at home housewife, an image very different from the journalists' own lives as working women. Long after Stella Allan had retired, a journalist on the *Argus* described the 'bread and butter of women journalists' work' as 'the comings and goings of the Victorian aristocracy and upper classes' with 'a constant and solid coverage of the society balls and diplomatic parties, the glamorous theatre opening nights when ball gowns and bow ties were the norm, the returning ocean-liners carrying wealthy Victorian passengers and interesting international visitors as well as mandatory racing, hunt and polo meets' (Conway 2008, 62).

Ironically, the expansion of women's pages in the late nineteenth century was partly a result of the publicity attached to suffrage campaigns and other women's issues which made women more newsworthy. Social changes, including the expansion of shops into department stores and the increasing availability of new household equipment and ready-made clothing, ensured an increase in advertising revenue to support these pages. The rise of 'New Journalism', characterised by large headlines, prominent illustrations, 'lively writing' and display advertisements, also influenced the expansion of women's pages, and created a demand for women journalists to write 'human interest' stories (Chambers et al, 2004, 21-2).

The contrast between the material published in most women's sections and the reporting of the 'real' often disturbing news on other pages of the same paper, a world that included violence, hunger and domestic abuse, is a feature of this era of journalism. In an issue in which it was assumed that a woman reader was satisfied with household hints and reports of society events, she could on other pages read of the hanging of a man found guilty of repeated and violent incest, of pathetic cases of abandoned babies, of a coroner commenting on the extraordinary amount of child killing or veiled references to failed backyard abortions. The social problems underlying these reports were ignored in the women's pages (Clarke, 1988, 253). Women journalists employed in this confined field entrenched the dominant view among male journalists that this work was not only particularly suited to women, it was the only journalistic work they were capable of doing, a view expressed in many forums from a review of the publication *Ladies at Work* in 1894 (Current literature, 6 January) to an article in the *Journalist* in 1944 (Warden, September). The conservative social message in Stella Allan's columns and her no more than mild attempts to come to terms with fundamental social and feminist issues, were part of a pattern that continued long time after she retired. After she retired as Vesta in 1938, Stella Allan moved to England and continued to write for the *Argus* contributing articles on the experiences of women and children in World War II. In

1947 she returned to Melbourne where she died on 1 March 1962 at the age of 90 (Keep, 1979).

Conclusion

This paper has evaluated the influence of the conservatism of the *Argus* and the environment of women's page journalism on the transformation of Stella Allan from a pioneer feminist in political journalism and law and a soap-box orator in the cause of socialism to a revered establishment figure. It also points to the importance of biographical information in evaluating influences on a subject's life and in revealing complexities not apparent in a study focussed primarily on a career. Biographical research added the pressures of real life dilemmas and prevailing society mores to the evaluation of Stella Allan's life and it established the importance of her husband's conservative influence on her transformation.

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