

## Obituary

### Margot Roth, 1921-2018, founding editor, *Women's Studies Journal*

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Margot Roth, founding editor of the *Women's Studies Journal*, passed away in Melbourne aged 97 on 3 October 2018, her family at her side. She has left a legacy for women's studies in Aotearoa New Zealand that is hard to overestimate.

Margot did not wish to have a funeral, but her long and productive life was celebrated appropriately by the publication in 2016 of *Roll on the revolution ... but not till after Xmas: Selected feminist writing*. This collection of Margot's columns and essays was put together by a group of her friends, Mary Mowbray, Pat Rosier, Hilary Lapsley Prue Hyman, Claire-Louise McCurdy, Linda Hill, Jenny Rankine, and Anne Else. Illustrated with cartoons donated by Helen Courtney, the cover was designed by Jenny Rankine and featured a very characteristic photo of Margot by Gil Hanly, originally illustrating Margot's 1990s *Broadsheet* column, 'The Gripes of Roth'. The publisher was our own Women's Studies Association (NZ)/Pae Akoranga Wāhine.

Margot was thrilled by the book. It was launched in Melbourne on her ninety-fifth birthday. The event was attended by WSA(NZ)/PAW members, Margot's family, friends from her retirement village, and some Australian feminists. There were also celebratory events at the 2016 WSA(NZ)/PAW conference in Auckland, and in Wellington, where Charlotte Macdonald spoke of Margot's contributions to women's studies.

*Roll on the revolution* is introduced with a biographical essay, which is drawn on here for an outline of Margot's life. She was born Margaret Frances Hogben in Auckland in 1921. Her father Julius Hogben, a solicitor with liberal sympathies, and her mother Kathleen provided a lively intellectual family environment. Margot was the middle child, between her older brother Lawrence and younger sister Sheila, both now deceased. She missed much of primary schooling through illness, but developed a love of books and began writing stories early. She attended Epsom Girls' Grammar School and then the University of Auckland, where she played a lot of hockey and neglected her studies. The outbreak of World War Two provided an opportunity for Margot to become a journalist, first with the *Auckland Star*, where she often wrote about women's wartime activities. After the war, Margot moved to Wellington to take up a position on the Labour Party daily newspaper, the *Southern Cross*, where she mentored Christine Cole Catley, later to become a well-known publisher. In Wellington, she met and married Austrian émigré Herbert (Bert) Roth. They had three children, Martin, Stephen, and Janet, and Margot found herself a young mother in the suburbs. She joined Karori Playcentre (a proving ground for several women who later became involved in feminism and women's studies). She began freelancing, radio work, and writing articles such as 'More Mums for the Olympics', 'Leave the Dishes in the Sink, Ma', and 'Housewives or Human Beings?' The latter, based on her radio talk and published in *The Listener* in 1959, pre-dated Betty Friedan in discussing women's discontent with the restrictions of their role and caused quite a controversy. It is reprinted in *Roll on the revolution*.

The Roth family moved to Auckland in the 1960s, where Bert became Deputy Librarian at the University of Auckland. Margot by that time had become involved in the Campaign Against

Nuclear Disarmament and various left-wing causes. She joined the Worker's Educational Association (WEA) in Auckland and became a stalwart. She went back to university, completing her BA and then a Master's degree in Sociology, going on to tutor in Sociology.

Margot pioneered women's studies through the WEA. She had been involved in the first United Women's Convention in 1973 and helped set up a women's studies programme for WEA, a New Zealand first, in the following year, along with Claire-Louise McCurdy and others. She joined the fledgling Women's Studies Association in 1976 and gave a paper on household division of labour at the first conference in Hamilton in 1978. She also became a tutor in women's studies in the university's Continuing and Community Education Department.

When the organization of our Association passed to Auckland in the early 1980s, Margot's presence was constant. Around that time, she divorced Bert, aided by becoming eligible at 60 for Universal Superannuation, her first reliable source of income since marriage. She joined a feminist self-help therapy group which lasted for quite some years. She bought a house in Mt Eden with Pat Rosier and me, what we jokingly referred to as a 'feminist housing collective'.

It was from 60 Esplanade Road that many WSA publications emanated, including newsletters and conference papers. Margot began writing regular columns for the newsletter and for *Broadsheet* magazine, at the invitation of Pat Rosier, editor during those years. The column was Margot's signature genre. As we say in *Roll on the revolution*:

Aiming her barbs at Kiwi ... traditions – rugby, Rotary, Anzac Day, the America's Cup, Christmas, Mother's Day, weddings and barbecues – Margot also calls time on sexual harassment, media sexism, unpaid domestic labour, unequal pay, racism, homophobia and violence against women. She sticks up for women who speak out and women who bear the brunt, takes pot shots at chaps in high places and 'manly posturing' and then turns her wit back on herself over poor driving, inept computer skills and the depredations of ageing. As 'pensive on her couch she lies', she analyses television and newspaper depictions of women, women's sports, the soaps, male show-offs and the perfidy of politicians. Most of all, she has an acute sympathy for every woman who dreads Christmas (*Roll on the revolution*, 2016, pp. 43-44).

In a somewhat controversial move, the *Women's Studies Journal* also came into being during this time. Those of us who helped with all the women's studies work going on were not sure if adding another publication to the voluntary workload would be sustainable, but Margot was determined, and in 1984 she became its first editor, setting her mark on the journal and holding the position till 1988. The journal, which has played a crucial role in promoting feminist scholarship, was initially laid out around a kitchen table by those of us on the journal collective at the time. Margot was very thrilled to hear that some of us are now working on a project to digitize the back issues of the journal, funded recently by the Suffrage Fund.

In the 1990s, Margot returned to Wellington and then in 1999 she left for Australia, where both her sons lived. Stephen, who had suffered as an adult from ongoing mental health problems, died in 2002 at the age of fifty-one. Martin and his wife Younju and their three sons still live in Melbourne and have been a great support to Margot, who lived in a retirement community. As was her daughter Janet and partner Mike, who live in Auckland but were also able to keep in close contact. Many New Zealand friends also visited her over the years.

Margot settled into Australian life and her chief joy during her later years was the Manningham University of the Third Age (U3A), where she tutored classes, took part in others, and edited its newsletter for nearly 10 years. She also continued to write her column for the *Women's Studies Newsletter*, her output spanning 1982 to 2016. Her last column ended with her wryly humorous parting message, 'Sisters! To the Barricades!!'

This outline of Margot's life and contributions to women's studies does not do justice to Margot as a person. While I was getting to know her, I realized that she struggled with painful arthritis, depression at times, a sense of lost opportunities and not being productive enough

to meet her own high standards, and ongoing anxiety about her son, Stephen. None of this stopped her being the most wonderful friend, including to many of us who were a generation younger than her. She was astute, politically committed, funny, kind, a brilliant listener, and endlessly encouraging of all our efforts. Margot was loved by many and will be remembered.

Tributes have been pouring in since Margot's death and it is expected that many will be published in our newsletter. Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, the association's Māreikura and Linda Waimarie Nikora, presenter of the 2018 Margot Roth lecture at our most recent conference, provide a graceful note to end this obituary:

E te ruruhi kamakama, e te whaea mahaki, moe mai ra koe i te kahui kahurangi, moe mai.  
He wahine pukenga, he wahine puku mahi, e kore koe e warewaretia, Margot, moe mai ra.

Skilled female elder; gentle matriarch, sleep easily in the stars, sleep on.

A wise woman, a hard-working woman, you will never be forgotten Margot, sleep on.

**HILARY LAPSLEY**