



***Feminist Lives: Women, Feelings, and the Self in Post-War Britain*, Lynn Abrams**

Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2023. 272 pages.  
£35.00. Print ISBN 9780192896995, Online ISBN  
9780191919640.

---

Reviewed by Kate Darian-Smith  
College of Arts, Law and Education, University of Tasmania

*Feminist Lives* is a rich and provoking study of British women of the transitional generation born during and just after World War Two, and how they experienced diverse 'womanhoods' during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s in an era of extraordinary social change and on the cusp of the Women's Liberation Movement. It is centred on women's voices, and their stories of building a modern sense of self and, for many, a new way of living and opportunity in the post-war world.

Lynn Abrams has brought together a range of first-person accounts, including oral histories, to recover and analyse how selfhood was reimagined for women – and not just by activists pushing at social and political barriers, but also for those within conventional marriages and gendered occupations. While this is a history that focuses on individual life stories which make no claim to be representative, taken holistically the book offers an important collective biography of women's experiences.

Abrams is a wonderfully skilled oral historian. The 'ballast and illumination' at the core of the book are 25 interviews she conducted between 2011 and 2021, many with her neighbours living in a small Scottish village (p. 13). The introductory chapter acknowledges the intersubjectivities of what Abrams positions as feminist encounters, and her 'simultaneous outsider and insider status' in the ensuing conversations (p. 14). She also uses interviews with women further afield and draws on archival oral history collections. The integration of historical data containing first-person testimony – including social research on such topics as attitudes towards adultery or the views of managers' wives; qualitative survey responses; published autobiographies; records and papers from women's associations; and print and broadcast media – add to the depth of the discussion and analysis.

The underpinning argument is that the 1950s saw the development of an increasingly acceptable idea of the autonomous female self, as constraints in education and employment were loosened and the benefits of the welfare state, such as housing provision, were being realised. Social attitudes were also becoming more relaxed around sexual intimacy and family structures, while public and private expressions of emotions rapidly gained a new legitimacy. It is at this moment that women rejected older ideas of self-sacrifice to marriage and motherhood to become 'agents of change in their own lives' with their actions and feelings seen as essential to self-understanding and fulfilment (p. 4).

Seven thematic chapters trace how women have reflected on these post-war decades, and in each chapter components of interviews and examples of key moments across the life course mean that women's voices are always present. The first group of chapters looks broadly at identity and relationships. Generational change and

post-war parental aspirations for girls provide the context for a powerful chapter about the bonds between mothers and daughters, including experiences of conflict as young women broke with conventions of homemaking to seek a different future. This is followed by an evocative chapter on identity formation through clothing and image, as mass production and consumerism enabled a process of re-fashioning for women in literal and symbolic ways. Increased mobility for work or education also set them free from family and community expectations about presentation and behaviour.

The 1960s and 1970s are popularly characterised as heralding greater sexual freedoms, especially for young people, and Abrams uses oral histories to demonstrate the complexities and constrictions as women negotiated heterosexual relationships. For women, their own choice and agency, as well as feelings such as excitement, were crucial in shaping sexual intimacy. Although most women continued to marry in post-war Britain, they had different expectations than the older generation about the necessity for marriage to offer an emotional partnership and a division of household labour.

Questions of equality as a condition of self-fulfilment connect the remaining chapters. As the stereotype of the 'unhappy housewife' became entrenched in social and medical discourses, women were speaking out publicly and to themselves about their mental health and creating what Abrams calls a 'community of feeling'. She examines how women's self-help organisations such as the National Housewives Register and Pre-School Playgroups provided women with support, friendship and networks, particularly for those seeking to return to paid employment after home care of young children.

Women's voluntary contributions to self-help groups add a significant dimension to understanding individual empowerment and wider social change. It also situates women's liberation as an encompassing phenomenon that could take many forms, not merely radical political activism. Abrams puts it this way as she concludes this study: 'The presence of feminism as a broad set of beliefs about equality of

opportunity and treatment pervades the testimony of this generation. They lived feminist lives'. (p. 235)

This is a book that should be read by all practising oral historians because of its nuanced theoretical and analytic approach to oral research and gendered perspectives. While Abrams is careful to locate her impressive history of post-war women within the specific circumstances of Britain, there is much that is relevant to Australia, where British cultural norms remained dominant. Indeed, the key themes of *Feminist Lives* resonate with the societal and personal changes documented in the oral histories of Australian women during the same decades.