

For social betterment: Social work education in Australia

Jane Miller

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Jane Miller has produced an excellent resource, looking at the development of social work, and particularly social work education, in Australia from 1900 to 1960. She has drawn upon her doctoral research to produce a rich account of the people, institutions and nations who were instrumental in establishing the professional grounding of social work. This is done through clear and uncomplicated writing which maintained my interest throughout. Vivid pictures are painted, using quotes from social work students, academics and other historic figures to show the evolution of social work through this period.

The introduction of the book traces the beginning of formal social work education to Sydney and Melbourne in 1929 with Adelaide following in 1936 (about 20 years earlier than Aotearoa). Miller states that, “the young social workers of the 1930s and 1940s were middle class women who wore hats and gloves for home visits and addressed both clients and colleagues formally as Mr, Mrs, or Miss.” (p. 3), and were often daughters of the conservative establishment who had rallied for the development of the profession.

The development of social work education in Australia was strongly aligned to models more consistent with the generic model coming from the USA, including a strong mix of theory and practice (50% of time spent in practicum), than of a more specialist and theoretical model coming from the UK.

The second chapter elaborates more on the development of social work, with interesting details, including that social work had strong roots in China and Estonia prior to its eradication by communist regimes, and explores particularly the beginnings and evolution of social work in the USA and UK. This was nicely detailed and enabled consideration of those influences, not only in Australia, but also of seeing better the path taken by Aotearoa, which unlike Australia, had been more strongly influenced by the UK.

Following chapters explore some of the contextual variables and organisations which played a strong role in supporting the development of social work. Again, unlike Aotearoa, social work was recognised as a profession in Australia through the first and second world wars and social workers were heavily in demand and in short supply. This saw the support of governments to develop education and thus, the workforce. Organisations such as the Red Cross and the National Council of Women also played a part in advocating for formal social work education. Later chapters describe the roles played by individuals (such as Jocelyn Hyslop, Norma Parker and Ruth Hoban) in supporting social work education and in leading the early courses in Melbourne and Sydney. There is also good account of the emergence of the Australian Association of Social Workers in 1946, bringing together the social work associations that had been established in all states up until that time.

Even though the book explores the history of social work in Australia, I found myself

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learning and understanding more about the history of social work in Aotearoa relative to its unique context, and how it has evolved quite differently to Australia. And ... for one of the first times I can remember, I really enjoyed reading all the notes supporting the text.

A real strength within the book, for which Jane Miller is to be thanked, is for the many

appendices which provide lists of people, dates, and events, which give an important chronology of facts for interested readers and future historians. There are also photos which depict many of the people and events detailed throughout the text. This is a “must read” book for anyone interested in social work history and I hope that Jane Miller may consider detailing the next 60 years as nicely as she has done the first.

Reviewed by **Barb Staniforth**, Faculty of Education and Social Work, Waipapa Taumata Rau The University of Auckland.