

Biography an act of FAITH

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Faith: Faith Bandler, Gentle Activist

By Marilyn Lake
Allen & Unwin, pp 238
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Marilyn Lake is an expatriate Tasmanian who is still very much a Hobart girl at heart.

Besides having extended family members in Tasmania, Lake was influential in the establishment of the early feminist movement in Hobart. Since then, she has moved on to hold a Personal Chair in History at Latrobe University.

In 2001-2002, she held the Chair in Australian Studies at Harvard University, a notable achievement in itself.

Apart from being an internationally recognised academic historian, Lake is an extensively published author.

Her recent book, *Getting Equal: The History of Feminism in Australia*, has been widely regarded as a benchmark study.

Lake has the unusual gift, similar to another Tasmanian historian, Henry Reynolds, of making a scholarly treatment of the past accessible to a wide audience. Her new book, *Faith: Faith Bandler, Gentle Activist*, continues this approach.

In his endorsement of the book, Malcolm Fraser, Prime Minister between 1975-1983, says of Bandler:

"Faith Bandler has been central to the struggle of indigenous and South Sea islander Australians to be treated with the respect which most Australians take for granted. The key to her effectiveness has been her ability to inspire people of all races to take on this struggle. In telling Faith's story, this book describes a part of Australian history which should be more widely known."

Faith Bandler, now 83 years old, is the daughter of a South Sea islander cane-cutting father who was employed in the Queensland cane fields.

Her mother was of Indian-Scottish descent. Why this is significant, Lake points out, is that Bandler was often mistaken as being of Aboriginal heritage.

This is all the more important as Bandler was a fierce campaigner for human rights and a better deal for indigenous Australians.

Lake says the genesis of the book was unusual.

"I first met Faith when I was working on Getting Equal. I had interviewed her and when we met up subsequently, she asked me if I was interested in doing her biography.

"I had finished Getting Equal, and thought Faith's would be a fabulous story."

Bandler, as Lake's book shows, was an extraordinary woman.

She was urbane, charismatic and sought-after in terms of her opinions and ideas.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Bandler was one of the first high-profile political activists who understood the power of the media.

Lake says that beyond these characteristics, there is perhaps one feature of her which stands out.

"What started to really strike me as I researched the book was how effective she was as a person in changing hearts and minds. Through all the years of public meetings, radio and television, she was such an excellent propagandist and performer, that she played a major role in converting Australians to anti-racist politics.

"It is interesting that today, when people discuss Australian attitudes towards asylum seekers, politicians respond by surveying attitudes and following them.

"I keep asking, why don't leaders try to change people's attitudes? Why don't people see it as the task of political and moral leadership to actually change Australian attitudes, which is precisely what Faith did."

Bandler achieved national prominence for her key role in the referendum on Aboriginal citizenship in 1967 and her later campaign for recognition of the special status of South Sea islanders.

Lake is in no doubt that the 1967 referendum is the pinnacle of Bandler's activism.

"This is the point where her life's work converges on the referendum. Faith was animated by the idea of non-discrimination. So the referendum in seeming to suggest that it was about how all Australians would be treated the same, regardless of the colour of their skin, became a crucial symbolic event for her.

"It didn't matter that she wasn't Aboriginal in that sense as it was seen to be about non-discrimination."