

SOCIETY OF WOMEN WRITERS TASMANIA INC
ALICE AWARDS PRESENTATION EVENING
SPEECH BY
HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE KATE WARNER AM
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
THE BOATHOUSE, LAUNCESTON, SATURDAY 6 AUGUST 2016

Good evening and thank you very much for inviting me to attend the 2016 Alice Award presentation evening.

I was honoured to accept Patronage of the Society of Women Writers Tasmania in October 2015; this is the first event of the Society that I have been able to attend and I'm delighted to be able to do so – although last December we did enjoy having the Society's President Yvonne Gluyas and member Robyn Mathison at Government House among guests at a formal dinner for the Ambassador of Portugal and his spouse.

And speaking of firsts, the national Alice Award presentation has never before been hosted in Tasmania. I therefore extend heartiest congratulations to the small SWWT committee which has worked very hard to put this wonderful evening together.

Now, I have been asked to say something about the history of the Alice Award. We know that it dates back to 1978. However, an award was in some sense a long time coming, given that the Society of Women Writers was formed in Sydney way back in 1925. And I would like therefore to take a moment to quote the first President, Florence Baverstock, who wrote a piece in *The Sydney Morning Herald* in October 1925, explaining the new Society. I quote:

“This new organisation of women ... spreads a net with a finer mesh than the London Society of Women Journalists, inasmuch as many of the leading writers of stories, nature studies, and verse have joined its ranks. This inclusion makes for a larger and more influential membership roll, and shows that a spirit of unity animates all travellers by the various routes which lead to publication, whether they use the humble paths of the

youthful reporter who describes a ‘very pretty wedding’, or the higher walk of the verse writer who can produce lines with a thrill in them; or the woman who can tell a story that will move, and of the nature student who brings all out-of-doors before us ... The new Society of Women Writers makes strong appeal to the spirit of comradeship already a growing factor among women doing similar work.”¹

How good it is to know that over 90 years later that spirit of comradeship is not only undiminished but possibly even enhanced, through the prestige of the Alice Award: the award being in some ways a unifying symbol of Australia’s autonomous state Societies of Women Writers.²

The Award’s unique bronze statuette was created by artist Alan Ingham, who took inspiration for it from Henry Lawson’s short story “The Drover’s Wife”. It was named in memory of Alice Booth, whose generosity to the Society during her lifetime helped to pay for the statuette.

The Alice is awarded biennially for an outstanding long-term contribution to Australian literature. It has therefore passed through many significant hands. And this is a fitting occasion to hear that roll call, from 1978 onwards:

Eleanor Dark; Dame Judith Wright; Dame Mary Durack; Kylie Tennant; Ruth Park; Nancy Cato; Nance Donkin; Elizabeth Jolley; Mem Fox; Patsy Adam-Smith; Kathryn Purnell; Jill Shearer; Kate Grenville; Margaret Scott; Rosemary Dobson; Brenda Niall; Christobel Mattingley; Susanna de Vries; and the current recipient Libby Hathorne, awarded the Alice in Perth in December 2014.

Now, it is true that every recipient has been worthy and so it is difficult to single out any one over another. But given that we are in Tasmania and that the Alice is being hosted here for the first time, I feel it is quite in order to specifically mention Margaret Scott, who I understand was a past Patron of the SWWT and who in 1959 migrated to Tasmania from the UK; and Patsy Adam-Smith, who lived in Tasmania from 1945 to 1970.

Both of these authors made significant contributions to Australian literature. What I will say, briefly, is that I read a most interesting article recently about Patsy Adam-Smith, published in this year's first issue of the UK journal *Studies in Travel Writing*. The article is called "Footloose in Tasmania: Patsy Adam-Smith and middlebrow travel writing, 1950-1973".

Many years ago, I guess shortly after it was published in 1986, I read and enjoyed Adam-Smith's *Heart of Exile*, her story of the Young Irish transported to Van Diemen's Land in 1848. But I did not know about her travel writing, her autobiographies or her life.

Robyn Greaves's article and its discussion of middlebrow literature, and the rather elitist connotations of this term interested me. I wondered where it would 'situate' (to use a buzz word in cultural studies/literary criticism) one of my daughter Meg's writing assignments – writing for the online magazine that accompanies the TV reality show "Love Shack"!

But what most struck me about the article was what an amazing woman Patsy Adam-Smith was. Her formal education ended at 13, she married very young and came from Queensland to settle in Tasmania, in Ulverstone, where she felt imprisoned by cold, housework, caring for her two small children and an unhappy marriage. She escaped all of this by writing, first as a stringer for the ABC, and then after she left her husband, by her travel writing.

And quoting from the article:

"As a woman writing from masculine space and in a traditionally masculine literary field [travel writing], Adam-Smith pushed the bounds of genre and (re-)created a space for herself and others to follow ...

In conservative 1950s Australia, Adam-Smith defied convention, stepping outside the traditional (feminised) domestic realm to embark on a peripatetic existence at road and sea, living and working among men ... Adam-Smith found travel liberating while at the same time contending with prejudices based on preconceived notions of acceptable behaviour in a conservative society.³

And the article ends with these words:

In placing herself outside the home as an itinerant story-teller, Adam-Smith disrupts and subverts gendered notions of space, offering alternatives for others (particularly other women), and a revision of traditional conventions. Her legacy to Australian folklore, history and literature is a valuable contribution to the nation.

That certainly deserved an award!

And it is now my great pleasure, as Patron of the Society of Women Writers Tasmania, to announce the 2016 recipient of the national Alice Award, to an individual adjudged to have made an outstanding long-term contribution to Australian literature.

¹ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday 17 October 1925 page10.

² The first Federal Constitution of the Society of Women Writers (Australia) was adopted in 1978 at a conference in Sydney at which time the first Alice Award, in the form of a bronze statuette, was presented to Eleanor Dark for her distinguished and long-term contribution to Literature.

In 2000, the Society of Women Writers (Australia) was disbanded and its branches became totally independent incorporated societies.²

³ pp. 69 and 70.