

*The Country Women's Associations of New South  
Wales and Queensland*

The Queensland Country Women's Association (QCWA) and the Country Women's Association of New South Wales (CWA of NSW) were both established in 1922 with a mandate to assist rural women. Each state and the Northern Territory subsequently formed their own CWA over the next fourteen years, with the federal body inaugurated in 1945. The adoption of a consensus-based, three-tiered representative structure, with local branches gathered into regional groups under the state umbrella, empowered local initiative. Members debated resolutions for social action at annual decision-making conferences at group and state level. The Association determined consensus and then lobbied tirelessly for change. This effective organisational structure soon improved the quality of rural life through practical infrastructure initiatives and services in health and education. The CWA provided a gathering place for women in country towns, organised street stalls, catered for local agricultural shows and livestock markets, and rendered assistance in the event of drought, fire and flood. The CWA ran social events including debutante balls, handicraft classes and cooking demonstrations. Proud traditions of service were established and consolidated. The QCWA differed from the CWA of NSW in one crucial aspect: by delineating which women that they would or would not serve.

The QCWA had evoked the colour bar in 1926, when they formally banned 'the admission of Blacks' to their association.<sup>8</sup> Members argued that the Aboriginal population was 'so well catered for by the government that there was no need for the Association to feel responsible'.<sup>9</sup> Consequences of this ruling, which only applied to Queensland, nevertheless impacted upon branches in New South Wales in 1956. Frustrated by the colour bar in the QCWA, South Western Divisional President Mrs Una 'Bubbie' Armstrong crossed the border to establish a special Aboriginal CWA branch in New South Wales.<sup>10</sup>

Disregarding organisational boundaries and the conventions of the rural colour bar, Bubbie Armstrong aimed to raise the status of Aboriginal people, giving them ‘an even chance to make good’.<sup>11</sup> In 1956, the lives and opportunities of most Aboriginal people were constrained by restrictive government legislation. This legislation differed in each Australian state and territory, with Aboriginal rights most limited in Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia.<sup>12</sup> The Queensland Government still maintained protective legislation that ‘catered’ for Aboriginal Queenslanders so comprehensively that they could not marry without government permission, were not legal guardians of their own children, had their wages garnered and could not own property.<sup>13</sup> By comparison, the Aborigines Welfare Board (AWB) in NSW, which was gradually adopting assimilation measures, was liberalising. Cross-racial Aboriginal advancement committees were then forming in rural areas to press for further reform, but they faced indifference and opposition from the white majority.<sup>14</sup> Critique of the White Australia policy and the colour bar would not flourish for another decade.<sup>15</sup>

### *Assimilation policy and the CWA*

By examining Aboriginal CWA branches from 1956–1972, this book presents the first in-depth examination of the role played by ordinary members of a women’s voluntary association in the cultural assimilation of Aboriginal women. This unprecedented collaboration between white and Aboriginal women enabled both parties to pursue and — sometimes — achieve desired gains. Although Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal CWA members shared the view that Aboriginal CWA branches could facilitate cross-racial mixing, skills transfer and personal development, their goals often differed. Charting Aboriginal and white women’s responses to this experiment thus enables an examination of how ordinary women both adopted and resisted colonialism as they challenged and confirmed the daily operations of the colour bar.