

VALE KAY SAUNDERS

It is with profound sorrow that I record here the passing of Emeritus Professor Kay Saunders AO (1947-2026) who died at her home suddenly and unexpectedly on 30 April.

During her long academic and professional career, Kay has been such a towering and unforgettable presence. She was large on the page, on the podium, on numerous professional boards and in everyday life. In short, a powerhouse. There are very few in any area of Australian social history production who would not know of her resonant import and sterling contribution. For Kay was one of those rare academics whose scholarship was not bounded by a single specialisation or two, but rather one whose informed curiosity carried her into so many pioneering areas of Australian historical research.

She spearheaded initial studies on the Melanesian labour trade, plantation economies, indentured labour and slavery. She opened out new areas of feminist research such as domestic violence, childbirth, state control of venereal disease and prostitution, female beauty pageants, women's mobilisation and agency, masculinity study, history of the 'housewife' as well as biographical examinations of outstanding female historical figures, among whom, of course, she was one.

She mapped out the story of the Australian homefront in World War Two as a history of state power contesting a history from below, carefully tracing out relevant race, gender and class relations, particularly uncovering the plight of so many of those interned here during that war. She wrote on important and controversial figures, such as Sir Samuel Griffith, Paul Hasluck and Pauline Hanson. She also wrote extensively on Federation, local history, oral history, political history as well as, later in her career, on 'scandalous', 'notorious' and 'deadly' Australian women, to the chagrin of some. She was never constrained by ideological prescriptions and blinkers but always followed the empirical sources to their logical conclusions - whatever the interpretive outcomes, courting at times controversy and indignant opposition in the process. Her huge CV alone makes for packed, exciting and, indeed, astonishing reading.

I think it is generally known that Kay and I were close companions and academic collaborators over many years. We shared similar approaches to the understanding and writing of history and a sustaining excitement about the unexpected twists and turns that any new investigation can reveal. I first met her in early April 1966, some sixty years ago. I wrote in my Diary that evening (6 April) that I had encountered a 'remarkable' woman.

Even at eighteen years of age, she was a startling and memorable presence on the University of Queensland campus, turning heads and continually provoking animated discussion. We rapidly bonded and were married in 1968, remaining in that institutional condition until the early 1980's, while parenting our daughter, Erin. During this time, we

enthusiastically explored (and one might say resuscitated) the ossified historical world of Australian race relations. Even after that wedded partnership dissolved, we remained unusually close public collaborators, researching, writing, editing, publishing and teaching together across the next couple of decades. Despite various ups and downs, we also remained close private friends and intimates.

Over the past few years we have spoken, often for hours, on the phone most evenings. Unbelievably, she would often tell me that she had now been publicly forgotten, though I never felt that could be true and tried to reassure her in that regard. This abrupt termination of our long connection and our many deliberations over past and present matters has now left a gaping hole in my consciousness and my existence. The roar of the Leo has gone from my life. A close mutual friend, political commentator, Bruce Hawker caught the essence of her well I think, when he wrote to me a few days ago;

She was one of the most outrageous, offbeat and hilarious people I've ever known. It was impossible to feel anything but the thrill of the moment when she was in the room. Like you, she was a beacon of light and a source of strength in those fighting years ... Vale Kay Saunders. One of a kind ...

To which sentiments, I can only thoroughly and sadly concur.

Raymond Evans.