

women's history as such was unheard of. Even when I was a post-graduate student in London in 1970-1971 there was little discussion of women's history. However, I had scarcely arrived at the British Museum on a short research trip in 1973 when I ran into Anna Davin, whom I had met two years before. She didn't say 'Nice to see you back' or 'Where have you been?' or any of the things you might expect. Instead her first words were 'What are you doing about women's history in New Zealand?'. As far as I knew very little was being done. Pat Grimshaw's book on the suffrage had been published in 1972 but I knew of no one currently working on what might be called women's history.

Soon after I returned to New Zealand, however, I was asked to give a winter lecture at Auckland University. 1975 was to be the beginning of the United Nations decade for women and the lecture series was to be on women in New Zealand. My contribution was to be on the history of women. In 1974 I began reading women's manuscripts in the Turnbull.

One of the major difficulties was access. The way things were catalogued often concealed where women's manuscripts were located. Much of this information was stored in the minds of librarians—not the most convenient place for such information to be kept. One of my major informants was June Starke who would frequently ask me if I knew such and such a source or tell me about a particular collection. Access has continued to be difficult. In 1983 I decided to go through the papers of Donald McLean, knowing that he had a number of women correspondents. I didn't dream of finding a marvellous series of letters between McLean and Susan Strang, his future wife. These unfolded a tragic story of their meeting, courtship, brief marriage, Susan's pregnancy, confinement and death. I have since often wondered how the course of New Zealand history might have been different if Susan had lived and McLean had become a bush farmer as he planned. I might add that Susan wasn't too keen on becoming the wife of a bush farmer.

The letters, diaries and records of nineteenth century women open a window on an intensely personal and domestic world. Some argue that we are not justified in using this window as it opens on to a private life. I don't agree with this view. Far too much has been made of the nineteenth century dichotomy between private and public. Personal and domestic concerns were not necessarily, nor even usually, private in the nineteenth century. The boundaries between the domestic world and the world of business, politics and the market were very fuzzy indeed. Domestic life was directly and indirectly affected by legislation, the economy and politics. In turn domestic life affected these other areas. One only needs to think of the impact of changing fertility to realise how true this was. Women were an integral part of the community; what they did and how they did it is crucial to an understanding of the past. The records of women tell very human and often very moving stories. The women of the nineteenth century may have lived in a world technologically less sophisticated than ours but their emotional and mental world was equally complex.

I have found old favourites and new names. One old favourite is Martha Adams, a Nelson settler of the 1850s. Martha recorded in her diary visiting Mary Griffiths. Mary had divorced her husband in England on grounds of his cruelty, although I think there are some doubts as to whether the divorce