

# Reflections on AWEA

## CLAIRE-LOUISE McCURDY

Interviewed by Jen Margaret in Wellington, August 2014



Claire-Louise McCurdy attended the first AWEA women's studies course in 1974 and spoke so often that she became a tutor in the second course. She was also a founding member of the Women's Studies Subcommittee.

Claire-Louise was the AWEA president from 1982–2000 and went on to play a leadership role at the national level as North Island Vice President 1981–1983, NZWEA Vice President 1989–1996 and President 1997–2004.

*Kia ora Claire-Louise, can we begin by talking about the years you were involved in AWEA and the roles that you had?*

I went to the WEA's first women's studies course in the first term of 1974. It had been advertised at the first United Womens Convention in 1973, which was sponsored by the AWEA—I noticed the ad and enrolled. Basically, I spoke so often in the first course that they invited me to tutor in the second. I was not *the* tutor as five of us shared the role. At the end of that year Auckland WEA held their first summer school for 10 years. The overarching theme was relationships, with four focus areas: foreign relations, land, political relationships and human relationships. I was asked to tutor the human relationships section.

I was on the Women's Studies Subcommittee from 1974 to 1985. That started with Margot Roth, me, Candis Craven and Linda Daly-Peoples. In about 1976 Hilary Haines (Lapsley) and Pat Rosier also joined. It was a very active subcommittee of AWEA and ran a range of courses. We also started an informal monthly meeting for people interested in tutoring women's studies because there was nothing. There were no text books—we were absolutely pioneering. At the first Women's Studies Association conference we did a combined paper on 'What is women's studies?' Margot did the research part and Candis, Linda and I talked about tutoring and broad definitions. We decided to develop a Women's Studies Tutor Kit which later became a book. We piloted the kit at the second Women's Studies Association conference in 1979. We were awarded an equal opportunities prize for the book published in 1983.

*What was the relationship of the women's studies subgroup to the AWEA Executive?*

A relationship existed from the beginning through Margot, who initiated the Subcommittee, as she was on the AWEA Executive and during that time had a two-year term as President. Then, within a year of John Bensemann and Mary Hancock becoming the AWEA coordinators in 1980 John asked why the Women's Studies Subcommittee wasn't fully part of the AWEA Executive. John and Mary were trying to move AWEA out of a brokerage role and into a more radical organisation, which included giving greater priority to the needs of those who had benefitted least from the state system. In the brokerage role WEA received all these 'night' class hours from various schools across Auckland which covered payment to tutors, although we weren't getting any 'capitation' grants to cover administration and overheads. By that stage the Auckland WEA had branches in East Auckland and on the North Shore. West Auckland (Waitakere) had also started as a branch but became a separate WEA in 1976. The branches reacted negatively to John and Mary's proposal that classes align with AWEA's purpose of education for social change. I later saw letters that had been sent from the East Auckland branch to the NZWEA (the WEA Federation) about the 'communist' takeover of the Auckland WEA. They didn't want to put the programme brochure up in the local community centre because of the appalling courses. The NZWEA president wrote back saying, 'No I can't do anything about it as each WEA is incorporated separately.'

John and Mary could see that the Women's Studies Subcommittee was doing what they wanted the whole of the WEA movement to be, and they wanted our support, so all the Subcommittee members became part of the Executive in 1985. I was involved before that though. I became AWEA president in 1982 and stayed on until 2000.

*What were the main strengths of the organisation during the time of your involvement?*

The responsiveness and openness; the shifting involvement as the WEA made space for people to educate about current issues. There were two principles that were central to women's studies in the WEA and to AWEA as a whole. One was that everybody had the right to education and included in that right is the requirement for that education to be accessible in terms of cost, place and style. Auckland WEA was committed to that and made very genuine attempts to manifest it.

The other was that the WEA was among the very few places in New Zealand where you could talk about absolutely anything and where there was respect for debate, information, research and going wherever this took you. There was a respect for things being evidence-based but in the absence of evidence you went out and looked for it. There was absolute respect for information and knowledge wherever it came from—the debate was the testing of the anecdotal, the prejudiced, the prejudicial. Constant questioning: why did it have to be like this; willingness to listen first of all; the definition of tutors as resources not definers; the recognition that everyone in the group is bringing their own knowledge and experience and it is as respectable as any other knowledge. So the point of a class is to be exposed to that range of sources and test them against each other and see what happens. So a course might well start with a lecture but the most important part of it was the discussion, and tutors were expected to have skills in managing discussion and ensuring that all the voices were heard.

What it is hard to imagine or remember now is that at the time there was so little accessible information—particularly about women. In the Auckland University library, the few books about women were categorised under folklore, because stories of witches and old wives tales were all there was. Over the 1970s and 1980s documentation of the realities of people's lives was really important. It connects to the Freirean principle that if you know and understand what makes up your context then this knowledge can be your ground for making change.

Forty years ago there was no Google. People were self-doubting because they felt they didn't have enough information—they didn't know enough. Now we are in an environment where the opposite applies—people are self-doubting because there is too much information to sift through. Places and spaces to take time out to think, clarify, understand, and strategise are needed just as much now as they were forty years ago but for different reasons.

*Tell me more about women's studies.*

The first point is that women's studies was absolutely new. The courses in the AWEA in 1974 were the first community-based women's studies in Aotearoa New Zealand and the WEA was an ideal place for them. Every course was about women bringing their own experience and contributing to building understandings of women's lives—which had been defined mainly by men and according to particularly narrow definitions. Women's studies was about breaking the silences. Women just being able to speak in a public context was a challenge that I think younger women have no idea about—actually believing that you could think, that you could contribute, that your understanding of the world was as valid as anyone else's.

There are just so many anecdotes to illustrate the impact that both women's studies and WEA summer schools had. I remember two sisters, from a working class background, coming to the 1975–76 summer school and talking about having attended a WEA summer school as teenagers in the 1930s. It had been a transformative experience in that they had found that they were comfortable in a context with professors and all these other people who included them in the conversation. For the first time they saw that what they were contributing to the discussion was a part of the bigger picture.

I also remember two women in a course in Pukekohe, eminently respectable matrons, who were very quiet for most of the time. In the evaluations they said that what had been most important for them was being able to go to the public library and borrow a book from any section, instead of just going to the romances as they had done all their lives. It opened up the entire library to them. They had been reading only romances because they thought that was all they were good for.

*How large was the women's studies programme?*

For quite a few years, women's studies courses made up at least half AWEA's total course programme. We kept the numbers low with a maximum of 12 to 15 in a class. We would be running three or four courses a term within AWEA. We also ran courses for others and I basically became a freelance tutor for the WEA. Any organisation, like the polytechs, came to WEA if they wanted to set up a women's studies course. We did courses in community houses and private homes in Waitakere, Howick, North Shore, Devonport, Pukekohe, Manurewa and at Manukau Polytechnic, Auckland Institute of Technology and the Centre for Continuing Education at the University of Auckland. We went to Wellington and Christchurch, New Plymouth, Kaikohe and Whangarei, and probably other places that don't immediately come to mind.

*The adult literacy programme was also a significant part of AWEA at that time.*

Auckland WEA started its literacy programme in 1975. A few other organisations were starting to develop programmes, but ours was the only one that was Freire-based. It was led by Martin Harrison. I trained as an adult literacy tutor with Martin in 1975. The whole basis of Martin's training was that you started by finding out why people were there and what they wanted to get out of it. If they wanted to read stories to their kids that was what they worked towards, or if they wanted to get a drivers licence that was what they got. If they wanted to keep on going then the programme found ways to support them. In the second year of the literacy programme the Department of Education at the University of Auckland reviewed it. They thought it was a dead loss because

students didn't understand about commas. Martin and Kaye and all of us were very angry about it. The definition of education being used by the woman doing the review was completely irrelevant to WEA. After Martin left we appointed June. She was much more conventional than Martin as she didn't have the same radical theoretical base. She was very committed to groups though—we were trained as tutors to work with individuals but there were groups for learners to support each other. With the development of more literacy programmes and a national organisation (ARLA - Adult Reading and Learning Assistance<sup>1</sup>) the programmes became institutionalised and the whole idea of people constructing their own course was diminished.

#### *What about AWEA's engagement with justice issues for Māori?*

Concern for social justice in relation to Māori was expressed early on in the AWEA.<sup>2</sup> Kaye Green organised the significant summer school in 1976 which focused on Māori land issues. The 1978 summer school theme was 'My Land.' It was held in Kaikohe in the context of the events relating to the Ngāti Hine block.<sup>3</sup> This was a time when Māori were 'returning home' and there was a recognition of the ways that Pākehā institutions cut across Māori traditions. The summer school was a transformative, consciousness-raising experience for many of the Pākehā present and this consciousness continued to evolve alongside that of Māori.

Te reo Māori courses were offered by AWEA as early as 1970. Later, in the 1980s, Ranginui Walker was approached by the president and vice-president to advise the AWEA. He was consulted about whether AWEA should respond to requests for Māori language courses and if so, who would he recommend as a tutor. At that stage there was a whole lot of protest about Pākehā muscling in on Māori stuff—Michael King got flack for his book on Te Pūea. South Island Māori particularly, such as Irihapeti Ramsden, were very strong indeed on no Pākehā speaking Māori until all Māori did. We, however, were getting requests from all sorts of people, including quite a few Māori, for Māori language courses. So over 1985–1986 we approached Ranginui and asked those questions. 'Did he have suggestions for a tutor given that we shouldn't be using Māori energy for courses that were going to have significant numbers of Pākehā?' He suggested this red headed, blue eyed woman from Te Tai Tokerau. She was Pākehā and had been raised in a Māori environment. She was very good and they were great classes. One of the Māori women on the course said it was very disconcerting because when she closed her eyes she heard a Māori woman and when she opened them she saw a Pākehā. She spent a lot of time in a state of cognitive dissonance.

Kaye Green and then Mary and John were very committed to making the WEA available for Māori issues. AWEA was actively engaged at Takaparawhau and John organised a public forum when the hikoi to Waitangi 1984 came through Auckland. I remember Eva Rickard spoke at it, holding up a a University of Canterbury history department text and proclaiming, 'Everything we are saying is in here'—in this thoroughly respectable text book.

In 1982 we invited Mitzi Nairn along to talk about Te Tiriti at one of the monthly women's studies tutor meetings. Also within the women's studies programme Ripeka Evans ran a course on 'The

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<sup>1</sup> Now Literacy Aotearoa.

<sup>2</sup> In 1943 in response to the government's intention to forcibly destroy the Ngāti Whatua settlement at Ohaku Bay, AWEA members, along with many unionists, participated in a massive working bee during which a palisade was constructed around the village.

<sup>3</sup> For background see <http://pacific.scoop.co.nz/2010/11/forgotten-ngatihine-forestry-land-rights-issue-comes-to-life/>

Political economy of Māori women.’ It was brilliant. Her course became a reference point for me. It was a perspective and information that I took on, and that I look for in any New Zealand history.

*Where there Māori on the AWEA Executive?*

No. There was an ongoing debate about, ‘What right do we have to demand the energy of Māori just to be credible?’ On the other hand there was the challenge that it was not particularly representative. When Christine Herzog came onto the Executive in the 1980s she had a relationship with Nganeko Minhinnick so we supported quite a number of projects and proposals for her people, Ngāti Te Ata. We decided that our role in relation to the Treaty was to respond to opportunities for education for social change—within the frame of being a Pākehā organisation and focusing on working with our own people. So the last summer school focused on racism, along with sexism, classism and heterosexism.

*When was the last Summer School and why did they stop?*

The last one was 1984–1985. They stopped because it was so much work and people couldn’t afford it—we couldn’t access enough funds to support all those who wanted to come. The last one had a very good programme, including a very good one for children. It was at the Bible Class camp at Te Henga (Bethell’s Beach) and one of the Coromandel collectives did the food. It went well but it was an awful lot of work and we didn’t have the resources to continue them.

*That leads us into talking about some of the challenges of AWEA during the time of your involvement.*

The adult literacy programme became quite large, representing about half of the funding to AWEA. The programme had been independently managing their share of the funding, which was an AWEA principle. By 1982, while it was still the WEA literacy programme, many of those involved with the programme had little direct contact with AWEA. I remember a proposal to the Executive from some of the volunteers suggesting that it should be called the WEKA adult literacy programme because nobody knew what AWEA meant. It was declined!

In 1982, when Merv Wellington became National’s Minister of Education, AWEA’s funding was cut. Funding to the adult literacy programme survived but was accessed through the polytechs. At that stage those involved with the literacy programme decided it was not in their best interests to be associated with AWEA. Following a very fraught Executive meeting they moved away and became Auckland Adult Reading and Learning Assistance (ARLA).

A lot of people thought it was because we were the *Workers’* Educational Association that we lost the funding and that it was not in our interests to hold onto that name. That was a battle that came up again and again at the NZWEA. Wellington in particular were very keen on changing the name to the National Education Association, or words to that effect, losing the word workers and any connection to the trade unions. Auckland opposed that very strongly. It was one of John Colquhoun’s battles.

The government transferred the tutor organiser coordinator funding to the polytech—to what is now AUT but was then AIT. There were several meetings with AIT about whether they would continue funding us as their funding had also been cut. Of the two coordinators, Mary became a polytech tutor and John continued with AWEA. He might have got a quarter time salary from AWEA reserves but I know he was doing a hell of a lot more hours than he was getting paid for. We also employed Trish Hanifin at that time. There was still quite a reasonable programme because people were contributing volunteer time and energy; and we still had some night class hours so we could



pay tutors. Not getting the accompanying capitation grants for administration and overheads made running a course programme even more difficult.

We stayed at 21 Princes St but we lost one of the rooms and moved the office into a smaller room. There was a lot of stress and an awful lot of meetings but basically we just continued what we were doing and lobbied Labour furiously. We lobbied as many people as possible for resources.

In 1984 Labour got in. Russell Marshall had promised to restore the funding but we only got a third of what we had received previously. At that stage we decided to reinstate the two shared coordinator positions and that one should be Māori and Miriama Scott joined John in that job.

Over several years around that time John put a lot of energy into exploring the establishment of a New Zealand equivalent of the Highlander School, a residential centre established by Myles Horton in Tennessee. It was a place for people working for social change to meet, resource each other, strategise and affirm their campaigns before returning to their local environments. Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks both spent time at Highlander. Central to Highlander was cultural work— theatre, song, posters, poetry were all seen as basic to campaigns for social change.<sup>4</sup>

The Highlander model connected powerfully to the WEA summer schools. One of the strengths of the summer schools was the impact of being out of your usual environment—having time to talk, listen, discuss and think without the pressures of daily life. You were free to change. You were free to articulate your own uncertainties, questions and unease about the world around you, and you were with people who had the resources and backgrounds to build on that. Having been to Highlander John could see the potential for a residential college that could meld the Highlander and the WEA summer schools models.

Over the 1980s, with Rogernomics and the very rapid imposition of an extreme right wing political and economic agenda, the need for this type of space became even more important. At the same time the increasing dominance of the market model made it harder and harder to sustain any sort of educational environment based on principles of justice, equality and wellbeing.

It was a long process but we concluded, eventually, that the concept of a residential centre was just too hard. Finding suitable land and funding the infrastructure to staff and resource the centre was not achievable in the political environment of the time. Now of course we could set it up as a charter school! We concluded that an urban translation of Highlander was what we should explore and that led to us buying the house in Grey Lynn.

#### *How was the relationship between AWEA and the rest of the WEAs?*

I was North Island Vice President 1981-1983 and NZWEA Vice President 1989-1996 and then national President 1997-2004. Margot was the AWEA representative on the NZWEA for over a decade, as was John Colquhoun before her. They took on the political and philosophical battles. Until the 1990s the meetings were very formal, and any WEA had the right to put in remits for support by the whole organisation. Auckland put lots of energy into proposing and opposing remits on recurring organisational issues like the roles of NZWEA versus the WEAs, definitions of adult education, the nature of WEA interaction with politicians and the Department of Education, as well as wider social and political issues. Although positive connections were made and individual members of other WEAs looked to Auckland for support, the relationships were never really comfortable. Part of it was the Wellington/Auckland power stuff and part of it was the male dominance of the NZWEA until the 1980s—the boys would go there for the battles. There was also ongoing tension between the national and the local. In the 1990s Auckland and Canterbury in

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://highlandercenter.org> for more information.

particular successfully campaigned for a change of name from NZWEA to the Federation of WEAs (FWEA) to make it very clear, including to the government, that the national body was a meeting of independently constituted WEAs, not a national body with branches.

*What for you were the most significant moments of your involvement in AWEA?*

There are several things. One of them is opening the Grey Lynn house—breaking the tapu by stepping over the threshold as the president of the organisation and a woman. There was so much optimism about that. It was the culmination of nearly a decade of working through what AWEA was about, what education for social change was about, and how we were going to express those principles in an environment that was increasingly hostile to concepts of justice, equity, education and human potential. For so many people the WEA was the place where you went to experience the aspects of yourself that were not about work, because for so many people work was a grind or a bore. WEA was where you could explore ideas, books, plays, music and especially ideas. You had that freedom to expand yourself.

For me AWEA represented a place for education for social change, and that spanned a range of issues. At any particular time more energy would go into a particular area that, because of circumstances and for contextual reasons, had become more prominent, but that didn't mean that all the other issues weren't there and continuing to be acknowledged. Inequality, injustice and the range of 'isms' are part of our perpetual present. It is about having a holistic vision of social change but responding to where the gaps, needs, and possibilities are at a particular time.

Another significant moment was doing the adult literacy tutor course and experiencing Martin as a tutor. It was a particular model of tutoring but also there were the Freirean principles—witnessing them in practice and translating them into particular behaviours when relating to a particular adult literacy student. And just thinking about what education really meant and what one's roles and responsibilities as a tutor were. It was that merging of theory and practice in a specific context that I found really valuable. My problems with ideology and theory have always been the potential for dictatorship and fundamentalism. The adult literacy course had humanness at the centre but it was coming out of a highly theoretical exposition on education, learning and radical change so I found it intensely exciting. I trusted Martin because of how he was as a tutor. It demonstrated to me that in a society that is so anti-intellectual the role of public intellectual can be very powerful in affirming our humanness. That was also what women's studies was about. For me the experiences in adult literacy and in developing women's studies, although from quite different contexts, were feeding the same sort of analysis and practice.

So often in courses there were people, particularly, but not only women, for whom the course meant major change—in their attitudes, politics and lives. I remember in one course asking the group what they would have wanted to be as an adult if they had not had either financial or gender constraints. After the class a woman came up and said, 'I would have been a doctor. What can I do about it?' I suggested she talk to the medical school and find out what she needed to do. That was the last I heard until 13 years later I got a letter from her telling me she was a doctor working at the Trade Union Health Centre in South Auckland. It had taken her a long time, she had had to go back to school and do physics and maths and get University Entrance, but she was accepted as a mature student and now she was a salaried doctor. There were a lot of experiences like that through which students affirmed the value of the sort of education courses that WEA was providing.

The Women's Studies Subcommittee was fun and that was also a feature of the adult literacy tutor group—just the absolute joy of working with new information and ideas and integrating it into your world view. The intrinsic, radical value of a new piece of knowledge and just the joy of learning. In AWEA there was the sense that at some basic level learning should be about excitement and sharing

—that learning is a joint project, not something that is about isolation or the individual. It is about your own expansion, but part of the excitement is in joining other people in a mutual expansion. I always felt that one of the measures of success as a tutor would be my being able to leave the room knowing that the group were totally engaged and would just go on. That happened often—that sense of a group just taking off.