

Joining the Bureau through a loophole in the library

Beth Wright

Women first began working in the Australian Bureau of Statistics as typists, machinists and tabulators. The first typist, Florence Paterson, started working permanently in the Bureau in 1911. Within two-and-a-half years a second typist joined her and, in 1920, a machinist. By 1924 there were six women working as typists, machinists or tabulators.

Dora Whitelaw was the first woman employed by the Bureau for her academic qualifications. Roland Wilson, soon to be the Commonwealth Statistician, hired her as a librarian in 1933, at a higher pay scale than several of the male clerical staff at the time. She had a Bachelor of Arts with qualifications in mathematics from the University of Melbourne.

It seems likely that Wilson wanted her not just as a librarian but also for her statistical and mathematical experience. Under the public service rules of the day it was not possible to employ women in research or clerical positions. The position of librarian seems to have provided a loophole that Wilson used to employ Whitelaw.

Kathleen Gleeson appears to have been the first woman formally hired by the Bureau for her research and statistical skills, starting work in the early 1950s. She came to the Bureau from the Commonwealth Grants Commission and held a Bachelor of Commerce from the University of Melbourne. Gleeson worked on the Vernon Committee in the early 1960s and was one of the key minds behind the development of National Accounts in the Bureau. However on at

least one occasion early in her career, a Treasury official questioned her suitability when she was recommended for higher duties by the then acting statistician.

'Will you please advise that there was no senior officer or qualified male officer capable of carrying out the duties of this position,' said a letter from a Treasury officer to the then Assistant Commonwealth Statistician Keith Archer, in about 1956.

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Dora Whitelaw in a group photo of CBCS staff, Canberra, 1936



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