

Jill Emberson: A lifetime of bearing witness to empower others

Abstract: Jill Emberson, an award-winning Australian journalist of Tongan heritage died in 2019. She achieved national attention for her campaign to provide a voice for all women suffering from ovarian cancer and for more and fairer funding for ovarian cancer research. Through an analysis of her programmes and interviews with colleagues, this article focuses on Emberson's journalism from daily news coverage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protests in 1982 for public radio to her *Meet the Mob* podcast series in 2014. It focuses on her significant radio documentaries on women in the Pacific for the ABCs' feminist *Coming Out Show* (1986) and *Ties that Bind*, which was about Tonga, including the Tongan diaspora in Australia (2009). It argues that Emberson's own journey to discover her cultural identity shaped her as a reflective journalist whose work was underpinned by a concern for social justice, marginalised communities, the impacts of colonisation and gender discrimination.

Keywords: ABC, Australia, cancer, ethnicity, feminism, Fiji women, *Frontline*, gender, Journalism education, Kanaky, New Caledonia, Pacific, public radio, radio documentary, Tonga

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JILL EMBERSON was an Australian journalist of Tongan heritage who died in 2019 aged 60. Before she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2016, Emberson was the host of *Mornings* on ABC Radio in Newcastle. Her courageous approach to her diagnosis reflected her approach to journalism throughout her career. She explored her own journey as a cancer patient through a podcast, *Still Jill* (Emberson, 2018a), campaigned to give women diagnosed with ovarian cancer a voice and raised money for research. She was Newcastle Citizen of the Year in 2018 and was posthumously awarded an Order of Australia.

Over a period spanning 35 years, Emberson made a significant contribution to journalism, particularly about the Pacific region, and with issues relevant to Indigenous Australians and to women. She explored the relationship between

ethnicity and gender, the impact of colonisation and marginalisation on Indigenous peoples, discrimination against women and the voicelessness of minority communities. Her practice was integrally linked to her own personal journey, responding to the shifting social and political context in which she worked and her audiences lived.

The significance of Emberson's contribution is that she went to where peoples' lives were actually lived, in their own social and geographic places. For her, journalism was about empowering others to bring their own witness to bear, rather than fitting them into pre-existing narratives. By recognising and responding to the significance of her own Tongan heritage, she was an early trailblazer in Australian journalism for reporting about and to the Pacific, especially women of the Pacific.



NIC MACLELLAN

Figure 1: Jill Emberson (right) with Hiti Tau (Time to Act) activist Vaihere Bordes at the 1995 Pacific Islands Association of Non-Government Organisations (PIANGO) conference in Moorea, French Polynesia.

Early years

Emberson's mother, Elizabeth Moore, is an Australian from an Irish Catholic background, and her father, Oscar Emberson, is a Tongan dentist who has spent many years of his life in both Fiji and Australia. After her parents separated, Emberson lived with her mother, sister, brother and maternal grandparents in Homebush in Sydney's West. Interviewed in 2018, Emberson said it was tough for her mother. The White Australia policy was still alive and there was no Federal government support for single women with children: 'There were notions of

shame and embarrassment about being a sole parent, a single mum with brown skin children' (Fidler & Kanowski, 2018).

She attended Santa Sabina College, a Catholic school run by Dominican nuns who encouraged young female students to pursue higher education. This was the period of Vatican II, with its more progressive social justice approach to Catholicism. The reformist Whitlam Labor government was in power between 1972 and 1975. It was the time of protest movements for women's rights, Indigenous rights and gay rights (Attard, 2020; Rice, 2020).

In her daily life, Emberson experienced racism. In 2018, she told the ABC journalist Richard Fidler, 'I didn't pick up on that till I went to school. And I remember distinctly when Streets introduced a licorice chocolate paddle pop ... and a girl at school came up, and put it out next to my skin and said, "Jill, look at that. The same colour as your skin".... It was very visceral. I remember as a kid in the bath getting the pumice stone and trying to pumice my skin off as it was too dark I didn't know why mine was this colour because we didn't talk much about this father figure of mine. I didn't meet him till I was about 13 years old' (Fidler & Kanowski, 2018).

When she did meet him, she was drawn to find out more about her father's culture. 'There's a humility about my dad that made me as an older teenager want to go and discover more ... which led me to travel extensively and start learning and studying. And when I went to uni, to make radio programmes about the Pacific Islands, because that was his heritage, and that was something I felt was missing in my case. I didn't understand why I looked the way I did' (Fidler & Kanowski, 2018).

Journalism beginnings

A decisive point in Emberson's life came in 1979 when she enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts (Communications) at the then New South Wales Institute of Technology (NSWIT), now University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). The course broke new ground in humanities education by linking practice in media and journalism with critical media, social and political studies (Bacon, 1997; Curthoys, 1995). Emberson and a friend Amanda Collinge met and moved into a shared house in the inner Sydney suburb of Redfern where they lived for three years, developing close connections with the local Aboriginal community and land rights activists (Collinge, 2020a).

Emberson enrolled in a radio major and became a volunteer at local public radio station 2SER-FM, working on a range of programmes during her course. 'There was a very close connection between the students and the lecturers and the running of the radio station, that's literally where we got all our practical experience within the first year of doing the degree, making radio programmes, presenting, learning how to edit, being part of a real life radio station was just

absolutely invaluable experience' (Collinge, 2020b).

Fellow student and close friend Geoff Adlide remembers the course as 'very feminist' and 'theoretically radicalising': 'It was mind-blowing, academic politics and sociology, semiotics, theory and practice. I was studying radio production, so was Jill Emberson, and Chris Nash was teaching it. There were community groups such as Gay Waves that we helped on the technical side ... and a Palestinian programme' (Adlide, 2020).

After graduating, Emberson was employed as a producer at 2SER. In a profile for *Listening Post*, Emberson described herself as 'having close ties to the black community' and an interest in Pacific history. She wanted to start an Aboriginal show run by Aboriginal people as she was concerned that there was only one hour on Sydney radio (2EA) where Aboriginal communities could hear their own music and their own language (Madsen, 1982).

In 1982, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people planned to get the attention of visiting international media at the Commonwealth Games in Brisbane for their battles for land rights, control of Indigenous affairs and against injustice in the legal system. Premier Joh Bjelke-Peterson declared a State of Emergency. Street marches were illegal, which led to the arrest of more than 100 protesters (*Deadly Story*, n.d.).

2SER reporters saw it as their role to report on protests in a way that ensured that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community's message was not trivialised by the mainstream media. *Listening Post* reported that mainstream media tried to block the accreditation of public radio journalists but eventually Emberson and two other reporters were accredited. Collinge, who also covered the protests, remembers that they saw themselves as activists as well as reporters (Collinge, 2020b). Emberson filed nine reports a day and worked 'non-stop'. She told *Listening Post* that the 'real issues were not being addressed by the Australian press'. She reported on the daily meetings at Musgrave Park (where land rights activists camped in Brisbane) where activists would discuss their tactics for the next day. Whenever Aboriginal people from the reserves got up to speak about life on the reserves, Emberson said that 'the press just left'. They weren't interested in the routine life of Aboriginal people (Peers, 1982).

Discovering the Pacific

In 1981, while still a student, Emberson made her first trip to the Pacific. She and Collinge travelled to Fiji to make their first documentary called *Women in the Pacific*. In 1985, by then working at the ABC's youth station 2JJJ-FM, she and friend Geoff Adlide travelled for three months through Fiji, Samoa, Tonga and Kanaky New Caledonia where a civil war was unfolding with roadblocks and curfews. The Kanak independence flag flew over parts of the country. (Robie, 2019). The two young journalists met freelance journalist Helen Fraser, the only

Australian journalist in Nouméa with access to the Kanak independence movement. She introduced them to Kanak leaders and slipped them into French military briefings, known as the ‘5 o’clock follies’. Fraser remembered being struck by Emberson’s ‘incredible curiosity’. She ‘cared about the injustice that Kanaks couldn’t get independence like everybody else had in the 1960s and 1970s’. But there was also a ‘personal desire to learn about what made her by getting to know the Pacific, particularly Tonga’. Fraser compared her attitude to that of some other Australian journalists: ‘Basically they’d just sit there in Nouméa, take the handouts from the French, take what the military said, not go exploring, not go into risky areas’ (Fraser, 2020).

Emberson and Adlide were in the office of Oscar Temaru, the leader of the Tahitian independence movement and then the Mayor of Faa’a, in July 1985 when news came through that the Greenpeace boat *Rainbow Warrior* had been bombed in Auckland Harbour (Adlide, 2020; Robie, 1985). The *Rainbow Warrior* was on its way to Tahiti to pick up Temaru and take him to the French nuclear test site at Moruroa atoll where they were going to try to stop the next batch of tests.

In Tonga, Emberson met her grandmother Matilda Emberson for the first time. As the eldest daughter in her family or the ‘*Fahu*, Matilda was a powerful woman in the hierarchical Polynesian society of Tonga. She was the daughter of Anga’aefonu Lavulo whose father Fatai Lavulo was the Government Counselor of Ha’apai. The family was close to the Royal family of Tonga (Emberson, M., communications with authors 2020). Adlide describes her as a ‘feisty [and] powerful woman who made things happen’. Emberson became part of her extended paternal family, attending Matilda’s 80th birthday celebration in Tonga in 1986, and her funeral in March 1987.

Emberson’s visit to Tonga influenced her identity as a journalist. Adlide reflected that although already ‘strong and skilled’, if she had ‘stayed in Sydney and not engaged with the Pacific then she wouldn’t have had that Pacific identity’. He believes that her UTS education and her experiences in the Pacific helped her develop an approach to journalism where ‘you think I’m not just here to tell a story that I can gather and broadcast, I’m also wanting to empower’(Adlide 2020). Her political commitments around Indigenous rights and social justice were strengthened.

Emberson and Adlide became involved in the Committee for Kanak Independence in Sydney and helped arrange visits from Kanak journalists to the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) in Alice Springs. They assisted Kanak Radio Djiido, which was established as a voice for the independence movement to counterbalance local French colonialist media.

Emberson joins the ABC

While public radio was blossoming in Australia, big changes were also afoot at

the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). In 1975, youth station 2JJ was established, to become 2JJJ-FM in 1981. Also in 1975, the Australian Women's Broadcasting Cooperative (AWBC), formed by women working inside the ABC, launched a weekly feminist show called *The Coming Out, Ready or Not Show*. Emberson was to play a role in both these developments.

In 1983, Emberson began working at Triple J. Amanda Collinge worked at the station during the same period, and remembers that 2JJJ was groundbreaking, a music radio station for young people and very progressive politics. It was a very exciting place to work and 'pretty much run as a collective [and] an alternative. But it was white' (Collinge, 2020). Emberson was the only person working at the station whose heritage was not European. Together Emberson and Collinge lobbied for the first Indigenous cadet at the station. They also established an exchange programme for Kanak journalists.

With a strong voice and media presence, Emberson was recruited to co-present the morning show with music broadcaster Stuart Matchett (Jenke, 2018). She did the political interviews, including with Kanak leaders whom she had met during her visits to Kanaky New Caledonia.

These were also the years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Triple J journalists including Emberson got involved in public health safe sex campaigns. 'We worked with the needle exchange people up in Kings Cross Frank, open, honest talk about safe sex, condoms, homosexual sex, dental dams, anal sex and going to prostitutes, sharing needles and taking heroin, safely opened up that whole area of sort of underground activity that goes on that people pretend doesn't go on, because we had to talk about it to make it safer' (Collinge, 2020).

***Coming Out, Ready or Not Show*—feminism—voices of Pacific women**

By 1985, the *Coming Out Show* had been on the air for ten years but the content had mostly presented the perspectives of white women. 'Re-defining feminism was a constant demand of Third World women's groups around the world during the 1980's the most provocative of these ideas was the Third World challenge to the Western feminist reform agenda. In the media world, this challenge took the form of a demand by Third World women for self-representation. They wanted the right to speak directly about their experiences rather than being spoken about by someone else, no matter how sympathetic they might be' (Emberson & O'Donnell, 1995).

In 1986, AWBC coordinator Jemima Garrett decided that it was time for Australian women to hear about women in their immediate region, the South Pacific. Garrett, who went on to become Radio Australia's South Pacific correspondent, chose Emberson as the reporter for the series *Paradise Past/Paradise Present*.

'There's never been a programme on Pacific women, what they saw as important in their own voice, and the issues confronting their new countries and

facing them in their daily lives, that's why we decided to do a series on Pacific women, and I did know that Jill was around and just how lively, and fearless and innovative and fun her material for Triple J was' (Garrett, 2020). There were three parts to the series, each of 45 minutes duration.

Mixing script, interviews and actuality with archival news reports to give context, Emberson addressed the economic, gender and educational barriers that shaped the lives of women and the threats they faced from domestic violence and rape. Her interviewing style was relaxed, conversational and sometimes, humorous. Non-English speakers were broadcast by running 10 to 20 seconds of local language, then using a translator's voice with the local language continuing underneath the translation.

Part One of the series dealt with the daily lives and concerns of a diverse range of women in rural villages and urban settings in Fiji and Tonga. In Londoni, a village 50 kilometres from Suva, 16 households are scattered around a clearing with a communal laundry and kitchen. Vini Vokalaw is the wife of the village headman:

There are the same money problems as when I was young [but] now times are harder. When I'm home, I carry out our family laundry or sometimes I weave nets for our family. Sometimes when I need money, I go out fishing for prawns, up in the hills catch a few prawns and sell them for two dollars so I can buy some soap for my laundry needs. The catches are very small because we do it every day...and the fish is getting smaller, and smaller and smaller. For me when fishing becomes impossible, we go without it, for others we go to the shop and buy tinned fish every day. (*Paradise Past/ Paradise Present: Pt 1*)

Emberson then interviews several young Fijian women who have left rural villages and gone to the capital Suva to work. Job opportunities are limited, so some turn to sex work. Young women earn more on the streets than working a 40-hour week in a factory, but sex workers face violence from drunken men and family disapproval.

A young woman recently moved to Suva says:

If you come in the night, you can see 40 to 50 girls going around the streets, they never find any job, nothing here to help them out, there's no job, no good houses to stay ... They go to the men, ... give them ten dollars, they go with another one ... It's a rule you can't muck in the town like this after night [midnight], some people talk to you and kill you, they beat you. ... they can kill you. It's happened to many of them in Suva, they get killed, the boys get drunk, and they got killed.... (*Paradise Past/ Paradise Present: Pt 1*)

In the rural areas, women dig on farms for ginger, one of the few exports. In the city, they chop up 70 or 80 kilos of ginger each day. A woman talks about cutting ginger into bite sized pieces for 8 hours a day, with only a 15 minute break. She has been working for six years, but can't afford to take a holiday. There are no other jobs.

The story then moves to Tonga, the only surviving monarchy in the Pacific with a rigid social hierarchy. Emberson's grandmother Matilda is not only part of a noble family, but she is also the eldest daughter in her family or the '*Fahu*', which gives her special privileges. Sounds of mallets beating tapa cloth can be heard in the background. Tapa (made from beaten bark) plays an important role in Tongan practices around birth, marriage and death. Matilda receives a steady flow of tapa and food gifts from her servants. When Emberson asks why this happens, she simply answers that it is because she is the '*Fahu*: 'I am the chief.' Matilda also has a small but lucrative business which she opened in Suva and has sent the children in her large family out of Tonga to be educated.

Emberson wrote: 'The interview with my Tongan grandmother, Matilda Emberson had a profound effect on my own self-identity and the voice I was speaking with in making these programmes. Being of the region and not a passive observer' (Emberson & O'Donnell, 1995).

While impressed by her grandmother, Emberson did not shy away from pointing out the impact of privilege and inequality on ordinary Tongans.

A Catholic nun, Sister Mali Tua Fuha, takes Emberson to meet two village women who talk about how women of all ages participate in the work of the village. Everyone is helping build a new church. They work hard to pay school fees so that their children may be able to go to Australia.

Emberson: 'Won't you miss them if they go to Australia?'

Woman: 'We will miss them but we never want our children to be in the situation that we are going now because when you hear us going fishing, the sea is going up to our neck a whole lot of nights ... we get sick at night because of staying in the cold. Then in the morning we have to get up and continue the work for the family.' (*Paradise Past/Paradise Present: Pt 1*)

The second programme is about women in the Pacific organising to improve their lives.

Emberson visits a Ni-Vanuatu village where women are overcoming the resistance of men to them organising to own a truck, and Vila women talk about taking their own products to market in a way that was not possible in colonial times. She then introduces the more radical fledgling women's movement in Fiji where Shamima Ali explains that a new women's group will 'stand up and fight for women's rights because we felt that women in this country didn't get a fair deal'. The group is pushing for an equal pay act and want reforms in the

way police handle the serious issue of domestic violence. The programme ends on a cautionary note from Hilda Lini, daughter of Vanuatu's founding prime minister Father Walter Lini, who works at the Women's Resource Bureau at the South Pacific Commission in Nouméa. She argues that women are mostly concerned with immediate needs of water, food and education for their children. She acknowledges that younger, more educated women will speak up if their rights are undermined.

If the message of the second programme was that 'women's lives are changing but slowly', the third programme is about the urgency of the political struggle for independence in Kanaky New Caledonia, including the role of feminism in the Kanak independence struggle. Emberson explains: 'Under the traditional land tenure system, Kanak land was inalienable and within two years of the French arrival 130 years ago, Kanaks lost nine-tenths of their best land and were pushed up into the mountains and onto infertile soil' (*Paradise Past/Paradise Present*: Pt 3). In the 1980s, the escalating struggle for Kanak independence includes a Kanak campaign of rural disruption with roadblocks and occupations.

Emberson introduces Déwé Gorodey, one of the original feminist Kanak activists. Gorodey, who went on to become a significant Kanak poet and politician, had represented the Kanak independence movement overseas but she returned in 1981 to live with her tribe and teach outside of Nouméa. University educated in France and founder of the Kanak Popular Schools, she worked with Susanna Ounei, another feminist and activist from the *Front de libération nationale kanak et socialiste* (FLNKS). Ounei was a member of Groupe de femmes kanak exploitées en lutte (GFKEL—Group of Exploited Kanak Women who are Fighting), a founding group in the FLNKS (Quade, 2016). These more radical women's groups were involved in direct action.

The audience hears that for the first time, Kanak women are publicly challenging the Kanak custom which says women shouldn't speak publicly in front of men. Gorodey explains, 'For the first time ever, a women's section has been formed in the FLNKS. The women raise money in the villages and tribes for the cooperatives and the popular schools, they sew, weave and cook for income generating activities and hold political discussions' (*Paradise Past/Paradise Present*: Pt 3).

Emberson acknowledged that friends and family helped her get access to villages but had also been invaluable in understanding 'the intricacies of custom that had to be observed just about everywhere. [Women activists] had gone out of their way to make me welcome and talk about their lives in a French colony and how they were organising as women for independence' (Emberson & O'Donnell, 1995). 'I sent tape copies back, had them translated and rebroadcast on Radio Australia, and eventually used them in regional training workshops. They became quite a valuable resource, not just an observation' (Emberson &

O'Donnell, 1995). (Emberson brought the interviews with feminist leaders to a wider audience when she published transcripts in the socialist-feminist magazine *Scarlet Woman*) (Emberson, 1987).

Together, the three parts of *Paradise Past/Paradise Present* presented a complex historical snapshot that defied stereotypes of the situation of Pacific women in 1986.

During this period, Emberson also worked as a presenter on the ABC Science Show *Quantum*.

The Pacific Women's Resource Bureau (SPC)

In 1990, Emberson moved out of journalism to work as the communications officer at the Pacific Women's Resource Bureau at the South Pacific Commission (now the Secretariat of the Pacific Community). Here she was able to work alongside Pacific women as they tackled issues raised in the *Coming Out Show* programmes (South Pacific Commission, 1995). She remained there until 1993, running a resource library, producing a quarterly newsletter and organising workshops to build communications skills amongst women at grassroots level. (*Women's News*, 1992-1995.) The newsletter covered issues such as domestic violence, HIV/AIDS, employment, fishing rights, and International Women's Day events and marches. Under Emberson's editorship, the newsletter turned into a magazine, contributions from women around the region grew and circulation rose from 900 to 2500. She also contributed a chapter on women in the media in the Pacific Island nations and New Zealand for an international resource book on women and globalisation of media (Emberson, 1994).

After she left SPC in 1993, Emberson worked as the communications manager for Greenpeace in Sydney. She then worked in corporate communications for seven years before returning to journalism and the ABC, initially as a freelancer. Her first major project was a documentary for Radio National.

Ties that Bind

Emberson successfully proposed an hour-long radio documentary exploring her cultural roots in the Pacific to the then Radio National program 360 documentaries. The coronation of a new king in Tonga offered rich possibilities. The political context in Tonga had changed: pressure for democratic reform had increased since Emberson recorded her interviews for the *Coming Out Show* in 1985. In 2006, riots in Tonga were reported in the Australian media. Not only would Emberson be able to reconnect with members of her own family but she could also observe the interactions among Tongans, including a contingent of 5000 from all over the world. (There were then 100,000 Tongans in the diaspora, including 8000 in Australia.)

In *Ties that Bind* Emberson directly addressed the contradictions and

dilemmas experienced by the Tongan diaspora, including her own. It was more than 25 years since she had first visited Tonga and met her extended family. Now she told stories that very much located her in her own family and as part of the diaspora community.

A few years ago, my father phoned me from Canberra to ask me to take on the role of the 'Fahu at the funeral of a Tongan relative in Sydney. I didn't know the relative and I only vaguely remembered the meaning of 'Fahu ... Traditionally every Tongan family has one.

The Fahu and her children, especially the girls, have certain responsibilities and in return they get the best of everything: the head of the fish, the best cut of meat, the best tapa. Her brothers and uncles keep a respectable distance. They look up to her.

So Emberson and her sister, Judy-Ann, found themselves at the funeral as the most highly ranked females.

So there we were, a couple of Aussie women with ever-so-vague Polynesian features presiding over the funeral of someone we didn't know.... Senior reps of our shared family line. We didn't even grow up in this family. Our parents divorced and we didn't meet our father until we were teenagers. And he had spent most of his life in Fiji.

At the funeral, Emberson was given ceremonial mats which eventually ended up in her garage. Later a relative explores the mats in the garage with her and explains their cultural significance. Emberson acknowledged in the programme that she should take more care of them.

She interviewed a range of people who have different attitudes to the monarchy. She sat uncomfortably in the sun for hours during the coronation ceremony because custom does not allow standing, and conducted a whispered interview with a Tongan man who worked for a global marketing firm but remained firmly in support of the monarchy. But she also interviewed others who did not support the monarchy but felt uncomfortable in speaking out for fear of upsetting family members.

In Sydney, Emberson explored the many problems facing the Tongan Australian community including the high rates of imprisonment, financial pressures on Tongan families to contribute to the building of a new church that replicates the one built for the coronation in Tonga, and positive and negative aspects of the emphasis on sporting role models.

She challenged Australian media stereotypes that were present in a popular ABC-TV series called *Summer Heights* that had a Tongan character who was 'dumb'; she asked Tongan male school students what they felt about how their community was portrayed.

Boy: ‘We didn’t really laugh at ourselves, but we were laughing at him. We looked at it like it’s a joke, but when it comes to reality it is actually like a problem. We get hidings from our parents. We would never talk to our fathers like that, ever or else we will be somewhere... it is not funny to us. It is funny but not funny to the parents cos they know what happens if that happens.

Emberson didn’t try to resolve all these contradictions into a simple narrative or to come down with simple solutions. Instead, she allowed the listener to sit with the complexity and uncertainties.

She concluded the documentary with questions for Tongans, herself and her audience.

Is it possible in Australia in 2009 to truly honour the ties that bind and also flourish and succeed not just as footballers but also as doctors, musicians and marketers.

It’s a journey of constant negotiation as families move back and forth between Australia and Tonga, between the old cultural ties and the new demands that require an individual response. It’s a juggle between aspiration and obligation and it’s not easy.

The ties that bind me to Tonga are traced through the complex networks that go back to my grandmother and great grandmother in a family that I didn’t even grow up with. I can hang the sign of my Tongan heritage on my apartment walls, mats and Tapa as art. I can use them to participate when called upon, or I can excuse myself from calling up my Tongan heritage when it doesn’t suit me, or I can tie them all up in bundles in the garage and walk away—for now anyway.

Newcastle—regional radio

In 2009, Emberson moved to Newcastle to become the presenter of the ABC Newcastle *Mornings* Show. When asked by *Newcastle Herald* what drew her back to radio, she replied, ‘Being part of people’s daily lives, providing information they rely on and being immediate.’ Her imagined listeners were ‘a handful of ... [people] all sitting on a lounge. There’s an oldie and a youngie and a mum popping up and down, listening when she’s got a chance. Radio’s like that, it comes in and out of our daily lives.’ (Jameson, 2009.). Journalism academic and friend Monica Attard remembers Emberson’s attitude to the job as exemplifying her approach. ‘Jill was ..., a deeply curious journalist who would look around her and think that doesn’t look right, that doesn’t feel right, that’s not fair, then she’d pick it up and tear it apart and end up doing something on it journalistically’ (Attard, 2020).

Lucia Hill was Emberson’s producer and later manager at ABC Newcastle. ‘She was never afraid to ask the tough questions and she would continue to ask

them. Politicians who can be a bit slippery and evasive, she'd just keep asking the questions, she really was absolutely without fear or favour' (Hill, 2020).

Hill remembers Emberson changed ABC Newcastle. 'We certainly didn't have the diversity of voices in the Hunter, refugee, Indigenous voices, and the socio economic diversity before Jill was with us' (Hill, 2020).

In 2011, Emberson's reports on appalling living and housing conditions of refugees prompted a Federal government audit and major recommendations for change. The series won the ABC Local Radio Award for Outstanding Coverage of a Local Story.

Along with colleagues Lucia Hill and Ben Millington, Emberson took ABC Newcastle beyond conventional morning radio when they produced the series *Hooked On Heroin* in 2012 (Emberson, Millington & Hill, 2012.) The context for the documentary was a national debate about the costs of criminalisation of drugs (Norrie, 2012).

Hooked on Heroin is a strong example of investigative journalism driven by a desire for reform (Protess et al., 1991). A social problem is established and its consequences for the community explored; the interviewer enables those directly involved to explain the situation through concrete details of their experience, finally those in power are held responsible through questioning and solutions are proposed.

The series explores the failed drug policy in the local context. The Hunter region's two-year wait for methadone is well below the national standard and very low by international standards. In the capital city Sydney, the wait is only two weeks. People who cannot get methadone, turn to heroin. 'We are losing 400 people a year.' People are being 'hidden and silenced'. Listeners are on a journey to break the silence.

Emberson's interviewing technique encourages people to describe the concrete details of living with addiction. A local pharmacist invites Emberson to visit her workplace to observe work in the trenches. She says there is a black market in the Hunter.

Radio headlines from archives remind the audience of the cost of crime. Emberson puts herself in the shoes of the listener interpreting those headlines. 'I don't usually relate them to the methadone waiting list in the Hunter but now I am starting to.' For every one hundred people on methadone, there are 12 fewer robberies and 57 less 'break and enters'.

The pharmacist reminds listeners that treatment costs a 'lousy \$5 a day' compared to '\$96,000 [a year] to keep people in prison, it's just not economical'.

'Imagine ... getting released, being cut off treatment and being told you have to wait two years to get back on methadone.' 'What's that like?' asks Emberson. A community worker on the ground replies, 'If you come out to Newcastle, and you don't get methadone then you have to go back to jail ... it is criminal really.'

Emberson switched to prisoners returning home to a ‘family like yours... ultimately this is all about families’. A father tells the story of his daughter, a person who was ‘doing quite well’, but relapses into addiction. He paints a picture of his daughter trying to detox at home spending the weekend ‘wrapped up in a blanket with a heater fan on her back, watching movies’ to get well enough to go to work on Monday. His daughter eventually gets access to methadone but now the wait is two years. The government is effectively condoning illicit heroin use.

After identifying who is responsible for the problem Emberson wants to ask questions about what can be done to fix it. The local police are not available. The lack of certainty and clarity of those in power compares with the immediacy and clarity of the experience of sources on the ground. When Emberson takes her questions to the NSW Minister for Health Jillian Skinner, she deflects back onto weaknesses in regional health management. ‘We can’t keep just providing money,’ she says. For listeners expecting the government to provide solutions, Skinner’s answers seem insufficient and defensive.

Hooked on Heroin won a Prodi award for Radio News and Current Affairs in 2012 and was a finalist in the Walkley Awards for Excellence in Journalism. The judges found the series ‘added to community pressure for change which ultimately saw the NSW government provide additional funding to reduce the waiting list down to two weeks’.

Meet the Mob

Emberson’s life-long commitment to Indigenous issues continued to inspire her journalism in Newcastle. In 2012, she partnered with the local Indigenous community to produce *Meet the Mob*, a podcast of a hundred interviews with Indigenous and Torres Strait Islanders from the Hunter region. In a piece written for a live broadcast from the Wollotuka Institute at the University of Newcastle in 2016, Emberson reflected on the series.

When I moved to Newcastle in 2009, someone told me there weren’t many Aboriginal people here. How wrong they were! Outside of western Sydney, the Hunter has the second biggest population of Aboriginal people in New South Wales But where were they? And why did we barely know them at ABC Newcastle?

On Australia Day in 2012, a land rights protest outside Parliament House in Canberra sparked national outrage when Prime Minister Julia Gillard was dragged to safety, losing her shoe on the way. The issue was still running hot the following Monday morning, so we opened the phone lines. Of the many calls, one came from Sean Gordon who had been at the Canberra protest and challenged both the security and media responses. An advocate for Indigenous economic independence, Sean made reference to his land council, Darkinjung, being the biggest private land developer on the central coast. I had no idea. Nor did our listeners. (Emberson, 2016)

Meet the Mob was born. Emberson contacted council CEOs, authors, artists and footy players. She arranged to meet guests in shopping centres, cafes, at the beach, at home and at work. At first it was difficult ‘but as the connections deepened the names rolled in’.

I laughed and I wept as story after story very quickly wound its way back to the history of Australian colonisation. There were lots of direct personal experiences of the Stolen Generation and of moving house multiple times for fear of children being taken. And many stories of poor health: deafness from middle ear infection; kidney disease; diabetes. And tension around skin colour: of being too black or not black enough. Of course, there’s stacks of uplifting stories: first-in-family HSCs, first-in-family university degrees; small business founders; actors; artists; footy players.’ (Emberson, 2016)

In 2014, the series became a podcast and by 2016, 50,000 people had downloaded it. *Meet the Mob Up Late* competition was created to bring listeners and guests together in a live evening show.

Emberson’s experience of the complexities of discovering her own cultural identity is reflected in the *Meet the Mob* interviews. For example, she meets young Wiradjuri woman, Elliana Lawford who is a cadet at the ABC Newcastle. The ‘Lawford mob’ is from near Orange but ‘Ell’ has lived most of her life on Awabakal land in the Hunter. Her Aboriginal father grew up with a knowledge of his family’s traditional way of life that he has shared with his children through month long bush camping trips. Her own life has been influenced by having ‘white skin’ meaning that many did not recognise her as Indigenous. She describes her journey to find her own strength and confidence in her culture. ‘We have such a big history, it’s an everlasting pit of knowledge. ... The more I know about my culture the more I think I know who I am. And I know that I belong.’ Towards the end of the interview, Emberson observes: ‘Ellie you’re very quietly diplomatic and confident.’ In part, Ellie answers, ‘You would be surprised how many different layers of people there are in the Aboriginal community. The journey of finding who you are is such a long journey and for each individual you will find them at different stages of their journey.’ Emberson ends: ‘She is not at the end of her journey.’

Another of Emberson’s interviews was with Judge Matthew Myers, the first Aboriginal judge appointed to the Federal Court in 2011. She draws out how the judge’s personal experiences influence his understanding of inequity in the legal system and why it matters that there are Aboriginal judges. As a child, he had seen first-hand what living conditions were in Redfern and wanted to change them. After graduating in law in 1997, Myers moved to the Central Coast and worked in private practice and Aboriginal community law and health centres.

‘Have your family origins been an important part of your life and who you

are today?’ Myers replies that it does influence his awareness of impact of the law on the socially disadvantaged. Emberson then asks, ‘Is that because you see it and feel it in people around you, rather than just an academic concept or a news headline?’ Myers answers: ‘Well you do because you actually experience it, you’ve actually seen the effects of it, and you’ve got a real understanding of what it means to them, parents who have had their kids removed and things like that.’

Myers tells her, ‘There’s still a massive under-representation of Aboriginal people as lawyers, and an over-representation of Aboriginal people coming into contact with the law. So, if you look at incarceration rates, they are disproportionately high, if you look at the number of Aboriginal children being taken into care and care proceedings by the Department of Family and Community Services in NSW is extraordinarily high’ (Emberson, 2013).

Another interview is with Matty Morgan. Morgan who identifies as Gay has worked with the Gay Mardi Gras, and for the Federal Health Department. He helped his uncle write a Gamilarol language program, which is the language of NSW’s second largest Aboriginal community. He believes that language empowers you and keeps you grounded. He left Federal Health in August 2007 because he strongly opposed the Howard Coalition’s Federal Intervention into Aboriginal Affairs, a very contentious policy which followed the *Little Children Are Sacred* report (2007). The report focused on the outcome of an inquiry into sexual abuse of children in the Northern Territory. (Northern Territory Government, 2007) Morgan tells Emberson: ‘I said, I’m not going to be an Aboriginal person instigating what’s happening in the Northern Territory with their own kids and mob.’

‘You felt that strongly about it?’ asks Emberson. ‘How could you send army trucks into a small remote community, and just start screening people because you assume they’ve all been sexually abused. I’m here for my community, and my mob.’

Last journey—*Still Jill*

Forty-five percent of women diagnosed with ovarian cancer are dead within 5 years of diagnosis. When Emberson received her own devastating ovarian cancer diagnosis, her courageous approach reflected her approach throughout her career.

As she told ABC radio, ‘I guess once I met other women with this disease I realised that there was a desperate need for this story to be known. A desperate need to kind of catch up with the awareness and success, better outcomes of our bigger sister disease and that’s breast cancer.’

I need to be a voice ...With ovarian cancer, women like me literally don’t live long enough to form the army of advocates our breast cancer sisters have done so successfully. (Collinge, 2019)

Once again, as she had done before, Emberson linked her own personal journey with the bigger picture. Through an award winning podcast *Still Jill*, Emberson traced her painful journey and the parlous state of ovarian cancer funding and awareness (2018a).

Emberson used her journalistic and communication skills to persuade Health Minister Greg Hunt for 'funding fairness' for ovarian cancer. She created the group 'Pink Meets Teal' and mobilised breast and ovarian cancer sufferers to work together. She seized every opportunity speaking with Federal politicians and at awareness raising events, directing donations to the Hunter Medical Research Institute (HMRI) where Associate Professor Nikola Bowden is one of the leaders of research in the field. Until the end, her voice was heard on ABC's *Australian Story*, local radio and in the *Women's Weekly*. She addressed the National Press Club in June 2018 (Emberson, 2018b).

Funding was increased but it was not enough. Two days before her death, she dictated a letter to Health Minister Greg Hunt asking for an annual allocation of \$20 million for Ovarian Cancer Research. In February 2020, Minister Greg Hunt declined Emberson's request on ABC News despite ovarian cancer receiving four times less funding than breast cancer. Anne Kempton, the co-founder of advocacy group Pink Meets Teal: 'to put it in context, that \$20 million is actually \$4 million over 5 years'. On this year's International Women's Day, Kempton made a call: 'We need to be given \$50 million every year so that something can be done for these thousand women who die every year like Jill, and they don't need to' (ABC News, March 8, 2020).

Conclusion

The issues that Emberson tackled in her journalism remain current today. Although progress has been made, women are still underrepresented in the media in Australia and in the Pacific (Bacon, 2013; Valencia-Forrester, 2020). They still have not achieved equality in many fields. First Nations communities in Australia still struggle to have their issues fairly covered and their own media properly resourced. The coverage of Pacific issues in Australia remains poor and has even deteriorated (Newton-Cain, 2019). Struggles for independence in Kanaky New Caledonia and West Papua continue.

Emberson's work provides a model of how a journalist working from a strong intellectual framework can go out into the field to gather evidence to tell powerful stories. As the first woman of colour at 2JJJ and Australian radio journalist to document the lives of Pacific women in the 1980s for Australian audiences, she was a pioneer of women in the media.

Her own early experiences with racism and her recognition of her personal identity as an Australian of Tongan heritage meant that she was sensitive to the experience of others. It strengthened her commitment to unpack the impact of

colonisation on Indigenous peoples of the Pacific and Australia. A clear love for people and a sense of humour combined with simple direct questions allowed those she interviewed to relax and tell their stories. On the other hand, she did not take a step backwards when interviewing those in power as was demonstrated by the hard-hitting *Hooked on Heroin* series.

She was influenced by feminist ideas and a strong understanding of the connection between ‘the personal’ and the broader political and social context. She was reflective in the way that she revealed her own position as a reporter and the contradictions in the lives of those she interviewed, as well as her own life. In her documentaries she aimed to lay out the complexity of positions rather than neatly resolve them.

However, the significance of Emberson’s position does not simply lie in her skills as a reporter and storyteller. She believed strongly that for democracy to flourish, communities, grassroots everywhere had to be empowered to communicate and that this was part of decolonisation. For her feminism had to be part of the process of working towards independence and sustainability. Her work at the Pacific Women’s Resource Bureau and *Meet the Mob* are strong examples of that.

From her early days as a reporter of Aboriginal protests at the 1982 Commonwealth Games to the last episode of *Still Jill*, she understood that part of her job as a journalist was enabling others to have a voice.

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