

The Chapters: Fanny Finch takes a stand

Tess McLaughlan:

State Library Victoria acknowledges the traditional lands of all the Victorian Aboriginal clans and their cultural practices and knowledge systems. We recognise that our collections hold traditional cultural knowledge belonging to Indigenous communities in Victoria and around the country. We support communities to protect the integrity of this information, gathered from their ancestors in the colonial period. We pay our respects to their Elders, past and present, who have handed down these systems of practice to each new generation for millennia.

On the 22nd of January, 1856, in the bustling town of Castlemaine in Victoria's Goldfields region, a historic event took place. Two women walked into a polling booth and cast their votes in a municipal election. They were the first women ever to vote in Australia and possibly the world.

Fanny Finch was one of those women. She was a prominent businesswoman and a single mother of four. She owned and ran a restaurant and a bakery on the main street of Castlemaine, serving food and drinks to the miners who had flocked to the Goldfields.

When she decided to vote that day, she knew that her ballot might be cast out, that she might face a backlash in the community or resistance at the ballot box. But Fanny Finch, as a black immigrant from London, had already overcome more than most, and she wasn't scared. On that day in January, 1856, a full 52 years before women would legally be able to vote in Victoria, Fanny Finch and one other woman walked into town hall at Castlemaine and demanded that their voices be heard. Fanny Finch's vote was a bold act of defiance and empowerment, but it wasn't the first or the last challenge that she faced in her life. Now, she sure was a trailblazer for her time, but it's what led Fanny to this moment. Now, that's the real story.

Welcome to *The Chapters*, a show from State Library Victoria, all about the incredible stories of some of Victoria's unsung trailblazers. Now, you probably know about State Library Victoria's beautiful reading rooms and galleries. You may have even come to see Ned Kelly's armour on display, but this show is about the stories that are hidden at the Library, the ones that you may never have heard of, and the librarians who discover them. I'm your host Tess McLaughlan, and I'm lucky enough to spend

my days exploring State Library Victoria's rich collection and in partnership with our talented librarians, bring its stories to you.

You can't help but be surprised to think that it was only the year 1908 that women were first legally able to vote in Victoria. Just over a century ago, women in Victoria had no say in how their state was run. They were denied the right to vote and stand for office, and they had to fight for decades to change that. But not all women waited for the law to catch up with them. Some women took matters into their own hands and voted anyway. Fanny Finch was many things. An immigrant from London, a woman making ends meet with a deadbeat husband, a business owner, and an unlikely trailblazer.

Fanny led a remarkable life. And today, I'm thrilled to be joined by Ana-Maria Traian, one of the librarians at State Library Victoria. Ana wrote a really wonderful blog about Fanny on the Library website. And in today's episode, you'll hear the backstory behind what led Mrs Fanny Finch to take a stand. Let's open another chapter.

So, Ana, thanks for joining us on the show today.

Ana-Maria Traian:

Thank you for having me.

Tess McLaughlan:

Before we get too deep into what she did, in a couple of sentences, can you explain a little bit about who Fanny Finch was?

Ana-Maria Traian:

So, Ms Fanny Combe, before marriage, that was her name, was a London born businesswoman of African heritage who moved to South Australia in 1837. In Adelaide, she worked as a domestic servant for author and artist Julia Wyatt, who was the wife of surgeon and the first protector of Aboriginal people, Dr William Wyatt.

Tess McLaughlan:

We start our story in the City of London. Fanny was born in 1815, the same year Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* was first published. Fanny was the child of two black domestic servants, and she faced adversity from the moment she was born. I asked Ana what this upbringing must have been like.

Ana-Maria Traian:

Her parents were, yes, slaves. So, we know about her mother, Lydia Holloway, that she was a domestic servant in London, and her father apparently was also a domestic

servant in London for a different family than the family her mother worked for, and they were both of African origin apparently. So, I think the life would've been hard, much harder after she was given to the Foundling Hospital in London.

Tess McLaughlan:

Eventually, Fanny moves to South Australia from London.

Ana-Maria Traian:

So, she started working as a domestic servant for the Wyatt family when she was in London still. Then the Wyatts wanted to move to South Australia, to Adelaide, and they wanted Fanny to come with them. And she was given free passage to Australia. So, she travelled with them to South Australia, and she remained with them for about one year after her arrival. After that, she got married to Joseph Finch.

Tess McLaughlan:

And Julia thought quite highly of Fanny. What do you think it was that made Fanny so special in Julia's eyes?

Ana-Maria Traian:

I think Julia saw the inquisitive mind of Fanny, her natural curiosity. She was able to read and write, and she was curious about things. She actually liked to read, and that pleased Julia. So, she thought that having Fanny around her might be a good thing for Fanny to guide her to be able to teach her some more because Julia Wyatt was a very outspoken advocate for women's education. So, I think she took Fanny as a project of hers, and I think that was very good for Fanny as well, because she learned a lot of how society works, and that helped her a lot in life, I reckon.

Tess McLaughlan:

Enter Joseph Finch. In 1837, Fanny moved to Adelaide, and not long after she and Joseph are married. Now, this was a really tumultuous period for Fanny as she both became a mother and had to deal with an unreliable husband.

Ana-Maria Traian:

Yes. So, in 1839, she meets and marries Joseph Finch, he was a sailor. They had four children in their marriage of about 10 years. It wasn't easy because as we know in 1841, South Australia was hit by a depression, so things were hard for them, and this led to the event from 1844 when they were charged with stealing a six-pound check, which meant prison for both of them; and how this happened? In November 1844, Joseph walked down the street in South Australia, Adelaide, and found an unattended cheque on the road.

He knew that it was a cheque. He was illiterate, so he couldn't make more than that out of it. So, he comes home and he offers his wife a deal. He proposed that if she would change the cheque, he would give her one pound out of the six. Fanny changed the cheque but didn't disclose this to Joseph. Instead, she kept the money for herself and she requested a neighbour, Elisa Fleming, to purchase goods on her behalf, and what was left from the money, she kept his money away. But she did all this because she was aware that under Marriage Act of 1842, a woman and all her possessions were the lawful possession and responsibility of her husband, so that money wasn't her money in the end.

In the end, it was ruled that no crime was committed, but the judge delivered an admonition to Joseph Finch on his imprudent conduct and ill-treatment to his wife because one of the witnesses during the trial said that Fanny was kept for long periods of time with no money, and this was a husband's duty considering that the wife had no possessions whatsoever.

Tess McLaughlan:

And it seems like six pounds was worth a lot at this time.

Ana-Maria Traian:

Yes, that was intriguing fact for me as well. I think it was a fairly good amount, maybe around hundreds of dollars in today's money. So probably somewhere there.

Tess McLaughlan:

And how did things end with Fanny and Joseph?

Ana-Maria Traian:

Well, one day, Fanny just decided that he cannot support his family and she needs to take action, especially because she really wanted a good education for her children, and for her daughters especially. She was always aware that if she had a better education, her chances in life would've been different.

Tess McLaughlan:

So, you can see at this point that Fanny is paying attention to the law and she's using it to her advantage. It's this same tendency to read and pay attention that later on leads her to casting her vote. But for now, around the year 1850, Fanny has had enough of Joseph and decides to move to Castlemaine.

Ana-Maria Traian:

Yes. She opens a restaurant. And the business is very well received considering that there weren't many women providing this type of service around. It was a community

of thousands of men digging for gold and just a handful of women. So, she started with the restaurant serving beef soup à la mode and pork roast from 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM. Later on, she added some rooms to her restaurant, and many people were saying that it was the only decent place where you could find boarding.

So, she became well-known and respected in the community. She was always outspoken when injustice happened, and people knew her. They knew who Fanny Finch was, and I think the best statement to that is the fact that she went to cast her vote in 1856 when women didn't even dream of having that right.

Tess McLaughlan:

So now, all the pieces are in play. Fanny, unlike many others, is not only able to read, but as you saw in the situation with the cheque, she pays attention to the details. And now, Fanny is also a business owner.

Ana-Maria Traian:

She was legally qualified to vote as a person who operated a business. This was what the law stated at that moment. She was legally bound to pay rates and bear a miner's right license, and she did both of those. So, she legally used that right. Of course, her vote was invalidated by the two male assessors in the voting room that day.

Tess McLaughlan:

So, it wasn't just Fanny who managed to vote in this election. It's noted that another woman did too. Do we know much about this second female voter?

Ana-Maria Traian:

The *Argus* newspaper doesn't mention her name, just mentioned that there were two women who voted. But I believe that maybe it was a woman just as Fanny, that was a business owner, and probably Fanny was the one who opened her mind on that, telling that, 'Look, we should have this right, because this is what the law says.' So, I think she was a visionary and road opener for other people as well.

Tess McLaughlan:

So, you mentioned that Fanny was a road opener for other people. Ultimately, of course, the ballot was dismissed, but what Fanny did was impressive and admirable, nonetheless. What do you think this vote really meant at the time?

Ana-Maria Traian:

I think it meant a lot just for the community to be able to see that happening and realising that women can have this right; we can do this. It showed power, power of

will, and in the end, it showed how intelligent she was, how she could manipulate the law on her behalf, like the first time we see this with the cheque, and now we see it here with the vote. So, she was aware of the law, she was aware of the loopholes, and she wasn't afraid to use them - and I think that made people think. If we keep reading the story of women voting in Australia, we can find out that in later years, after Fanny voted, that women in different locations across Australia started to show up and cast their votes.

Yes, they were annulled, they weren't taking consideration, so that grew awareness, and the fact that the newspaper published that, made other people think, made other women realise that they should have that right. Why shouldn't they? So, I think she opened roads that she didn't even realise she opened.

Tess McLaughlan:

So, does that mean that Fanny was the first woman to vote in Australia?

Ana-Maria Traian:

I'm not sure, but probably, yes, and if not the first, maybe the second.

Tess McLaughlan:

Now you heard Ana refer to Fanny as a road opener for other women, and I just think that's so true. It's amazing to think that Fanny was able to vote 52 years before it was legal in Victoria. I asked Ana what she thought of Fanny's legacy as a trailblazer.

Ana-Maria Traian:

Well, I think that Fanny was a woman well ahead of her times, that's for sure. Because if you look at her life back then, and you look at our lives nowadays, you can see so many similarities. She was a businesswoman. She raised her children as a single mom. She went on voting. She was a well outspoken voice in her community. So, she lived a life almost as similar as ours nowadays. Soon it'll be 200 years, but it's like yesterday, which I think it's truly, truly amazing.

Tess McLaughlan:

Fanny's legacy continues to inspire at the Library. What else has kicked off since writing this article where listeners might be able to learn more about Fanny and others like her?

Ana-Maria Traian:

Well, Fanny Finch captivates. She was a smart, strong, courageous woman that has inspired and inspires still. In 2018, actually a Creative Fellow here at the Library, Santilla Chingaipe, undertook a research project to uncover the stories of African

descendant migrants in Australia's colonial history. And Fanny Finch was one of her subjects. You can see the results of Santilla's research in her unforgettable documentary *Our African Roots*, and it's screening on SBS On Demand. Also Santilla's book, which details the untold stories of African convicts is forthcoming, so I think that's something that you can look into and learn a bit more about our Fanny.

Tess McLaughlan:

Ana, thanks so much for joining us on the show today.

Ana-Maria Traian:

Thank you so much for having me. It was a pleasure.

Tess McLaughlan:

You've been listening to *The Chapters*, a show from State Library Victoria, all about the incredible stories of some of Victoria's unsung trailblazers. If you're interested in finding out more about today's topic, you can read the article that this episode was based on, which you can find in the show notes. For more information about State Library Victoria's collections, events and services, head over to the Library's website at slv.vic.gov.au or visit us in person.

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This podcast was recorded by State Library Victoria on the lands of the Wurundjeri People.