

Hilarie Lindsay

REVIEW

WOMEN BY THEMSELVES

Women by Themselves collected by the Society of Women Writers (Aust) Victorian Branch, Coles Publications pb, pp120, \$9.95.

With the interest shown in women's writing over recent years more and more hidden works are being uncovered. *Women by Themselves* is a valuable book indeed, with extracts from diaries and letters which give a picture of the heroic struggle of many women in settling in a new and often hostile land.

There is an account of a family travelling to Australia from Liverpool by steerage. An editorial note says that most people in steerage were illiterate. So that this is a rare insight into conditions on board ship. The passengers were herded into unbelievably cramped conditions with death and sickness inevitable. When the Government Inspector made his customary visit to the ship before it sailed, the passengers were ordered below so that they couldn't complain. A typical entry is "...two babies have died lately. They were thrown overboard immediately...when it rains the rain streams in and wets everything. Our bed and clothes get soaking wet and we have no means of drying them."

Catherine McLeod's diary is on a happier note. She talks about a picnic that lasted for five days. "All the ladies went off and had a delightful bathe in the mouth of the river, with the gentlemen having the same in another direction."

1929 saw the establishment of a colony at Cooktown in Queensland where the author of the diary, Molly Claux, complains because two of the young men chosen to be part of her group did not measure up to the Hellenic ideal. It was to be a nudist colony devoted to healthy living. She says that "Fred is out of proportion and unhealthy—featured and Max, although facially handsome, has an elongated, underdeveloped, disproportionate frame, which is an accompaniment, probably, of his suppressed or arrested sex development."

Bessie McMahon kept a diary in 1898. She talks of working on the farm, "...gave the cow bails a bit of a sweep, made pudding, swept out harness room." She also decorates her hat with ribbon, makes clothes, new curtains, varnishes the floor and helps with church socials.

Every contribution is well chosen and the character of the women shines through in their writing. An enjoyable read and well worth buying.