

PATRICIA CLARKE

Frances Taylor, founder and editor, guides *Woman's World* to success

When Frances Taylor began a monthly journal, *Woman's World*, in December 1921 in Melbourne, which she edited, produced and managed herself, sceptics forecast 'a speedy death'.¹ Two years was regarded as the most a periodical not backed by an established publisher or media interests could expect to survive.² Against the odds, *Woman's World* flourished and within four years had 12,000 readers.³ Several factors contributed to its success, particularly the unique way in which Taylor combined traditional women's magazine topics of homemaking, mothercraft and fashion with promotion of female independence at a time when a new world of freedom was opening for women. She promoted her vision of independence through articles on women in new fields – for example, building weekenders, travelling to exotic destinations and taking up motoring – and by publicising women in unusual occupations. To this she added her pioneering exploitation of radio broadcasts to publicise her publication and attract readers.

The 1920s was a liberating era for many young women, and Taylor was an exemplar. She rode a horse on a solo journey of nearly 700 kilometres across Victoria, she searched for stories in New Guinea in the garb of a young man, she built a hut in the hills outside Melbourne, she was an early motoring enthusiast, and she turned her risky venture of editing and managing a monthly journal into a resounding success.

Frances Taylor, c. 1916. Photographer unknown. Australian Manuscripts Collection, MS 10726, Box 985/5. Gift of Mrs B Garrett.



A slightly built young woman, Taylor had the sporty look that came with the faintly rebellious bobbed haircut of the flapper era. Her friends knew her as The Midge, because, so a fellow journalist wrote, she carried so much journalistic sting to the square inch and she whirled gaily from adventure to adventure.⁴ Her confidence and courageous adventuring spirit were never more evident than when, only six months after she began her magazine, she set out to send her readers reports from the little-known outpost of New Guinea. She backed her judgment that ‘the intelligent woman’ would want to read about little-known places within Australia’s sphere, even if journeys such as hers were out of the reach of most women. Most of her readers were housewives and mothers leading the more usual female life of the 1920s. Taylor catered for their day-to-day issues with the regular inclusion of homemaking hints, fashion, health and baby care, but the emphasis of her journal remained what women were achieving and what could come within their reach.

Formative years

Irene Frances Taylor was born on 17 December 1890 at St Kilda, a south-east bay-side suburb of Melbourne. She was the daughter of the Reverend Edward Taylor, a graduate of Cheshunt non-conformist theological college, north-east London, and his wife, Alice (née Mumford). When she was a young child her father moved to the ministry at Port Chalmers, New Zealand, where she attended primary school; later, she studied at Otago Girls’ High School in Dunedin.⁵ By 1905 her father was back in Melbourne as a minister in the inner suburb of Richmond, and Frances completed her education at Presbyterian Ladies College, East Melbourne, in 1907.⁶ Her friend Stella Allan, an influential Melbourne journalist, credited to Taylor’s ‘Puritan upbringing’ her ‘self-command and strictness of judgment’, which allowed her to make use of her great powers of thought and initiative.⁷

After school, Taylor left Melbourne to take a job as secretary to the manager and editor of the *Mildura Cultivator*, one of the three local papers which in 1920 formed the *Sunraysia Daily*. In Mildura, on the north-western boundary of the state of Victoria, she gained valuable experience in layout, editing and advertising, which was vital to her emergence as an editor in Melbourne.⁸ In her spare time, she began to establish herself as a freelance journalist and writer of short stories and sketches.⁹ She made many friends among the women who lived and worked in the district, and also of one who passed through: Ruth Hollick, like Taylor an adventurous young woman, made a living as a travelling photographer touring the Victorian Western District and the Riverina, the south-west agricultural region of New South Wales, in

her small car, which she had to hand crank at every start.¹⁰ During World War I Hollick moved to Melbourne, where she became a leading photographer; when Taylor began her periodical, Hollick's study of Melbourne-born prima donna Dame Nellie Melba was the cover of the first issue, and Hollick's photographs of society women and child portraits featured in many subsequent issues.¹¹

Taylor left Mildura in October 1916 on a solo horseback ride, reaching the outskirts of Melbourne in 12 days. In her diary she recorded the name of the town she reached each day, the distance she travelled, the cost of food, the price of accommodation when this was in a hotel and the names of people she met or with whom she stayed, occasionally adding a note about the journey. She rode from Mildura south-eastwards through towns in the Mallee region of north-west Victoria, skirted the Grampian sandstone mountain ranges and travelled through the gold rush towns north-east of Melbourne to Keilor, on the outskirts of the city. In 1979, nearly 50 years after her death, Mrs B Garrett donated Taylor's diary of her trip to State Library Victoria, with a letter explaining that Taylor had made the ride to 'break – or establish' a record and that she had been greeted by the press when she arrived in Melbourne.¹² Breaking a record may have been Taylor's initial impetus, but the main outcome of her ride was a deep understanding of the needs of the country women with whom she met and stayed on the way.

Between her return to Melbourne and the start of *Woman's World*, Taylor gained further experience in editing, publishing and financing publications through her work on two very different periodicals. Her first position was editor of the *Southern Grocer of Australasia* (later the *Australasian Grocer*), the trade journal of the Grocers' Association of Victoria, which introduced her to the commercial as well as the professional aspects of magazine production. Then, at the beginning of 1919 she was appointed editor of *The Gum Tree*, a publication that tapped into a different demographic for articles and advertisements. The official journal of the Australian Forest League's Victorian branch, it was devoted 'to the conservation, propagation and utilisation of Australian trees'. In addition to editing the journal and contributing articles, Taylor became secretary of the organisation.¹³ Taylor continued editing *The Gum Tree* until the late 1920s and wrote some articles. She also became secretary of the League of Tree Lovers and was made an honorary life member.¹⁴

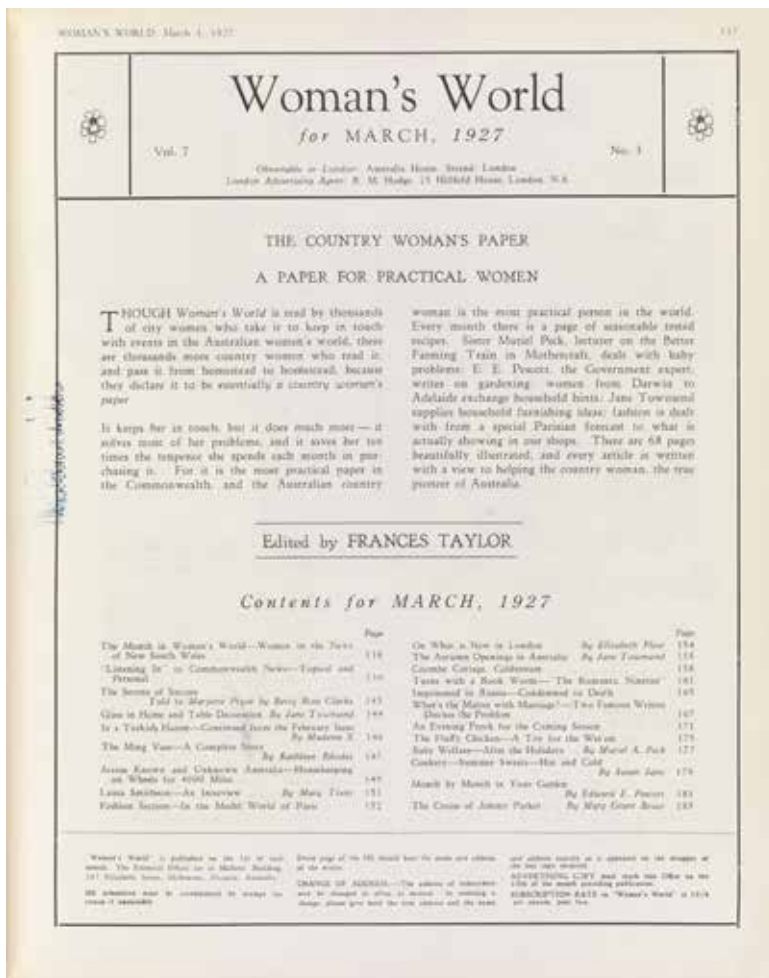
Planning *Woman's World*

Taylor planned the start of her monthly journal for women during an enforced break, following an injury in a tram accident in 1920, which she spent in the rough rural hut she built at Kangaroo Ground, in the Yarra Valley, outside



Front cover, *Woman's World of Australia: a town & country journal for Australian women*, Melbourne: Woman's World, March 1927

Melbourne. Her aim for *Woman's World* was 'to provide the intelligent Australian with an up-to-date paper dealing with the latest developments in the world of women'. Housewives and mothers made up most of the likely audience, but she also aimed at working women like herself and her female friends: 'a new type of woman, well-educated, ambitious and resolutely middle-class'.¹⁵ Among her friends were some of Melbourne's early women journalists, who met for lunch at what became known as the Press Gang table at the Lyceum Club, a social club for professional women in Collins Street, in the city of Melbourne. Regular lunch-goers included Stella Allan, who under the name Vesta edited the women's section of the *Argus*; Molly Trait and Allan's daughter Patricia, from Melbourne's *Argus* women's page staff; Kathleen Syme, from Melbourne's *Age*; Barbara Ratz, from the *Sun*; Edith Allen, from the *Herald* (Melbourne); and well-known writer and lawyer Anna



Title/contents page, *Woman's World of Australia: a town & country journal for Australian women*, Melbourne: *Woman's World*, March 1927

Brennan. Even in this high-powered group, Taylor was 'at the centre of all lively conversation'.¹⁶ Networking led not only to friendships but to leads on likely stories, authors and useful connections.¹⁷

Dressed in a tailor-made suit and a Woodrow-style hat (a soft-peaked wool felt hat made for lady motorists),¹⁸ and armed with her dummy magazine of blank pages, Taylor got her magazine off the ground by visiting business houses in the city, soliciting for advertisements. 'Without capital or business influence,' Anna Brennan wrote, 'she inspired sufficient confidence to induce business firms to give advertisements to her "skeleton" magazine'.¹⁹ A later editor, Betty MacMillan, attributed Taylor's success to her 'persuasive efforts and her clear conception of what a woman's magazine could achieve'.²⁰ As she planned the magazine, Taylor referred to the books she had acquired on production, colour printing, layout and advertising.²¹ After canvassing by day,

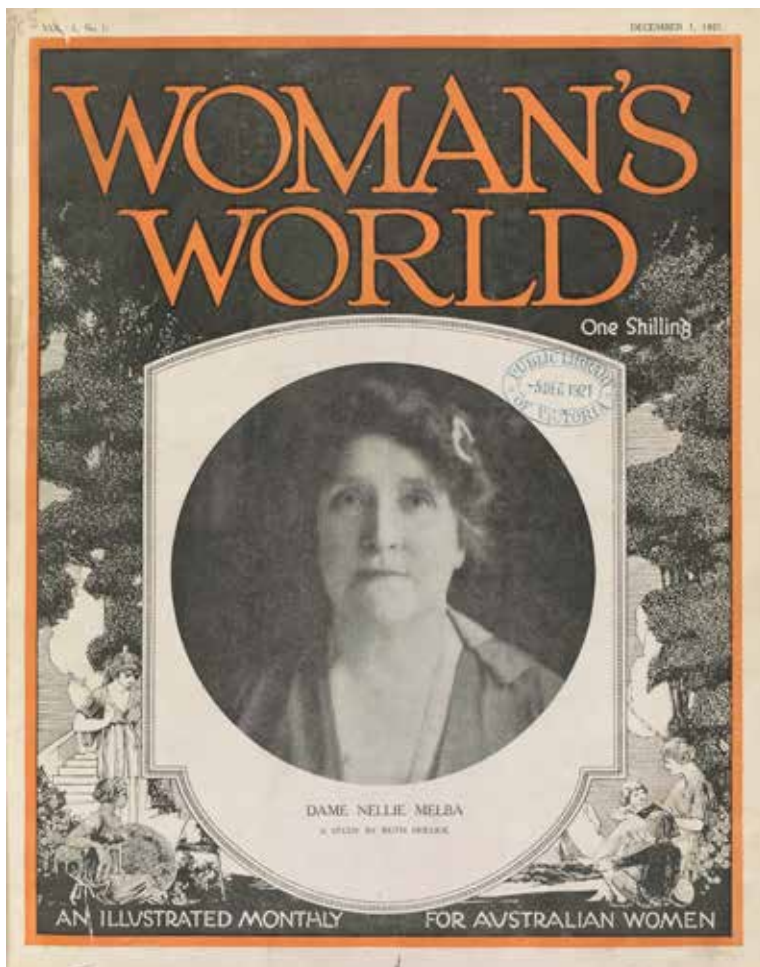
she prepared the contents at night, keeping costs to a minimum by writing a considerable part of the magazine herself. She used several pseudonyms, most frequently Jane Townsend for articles on practical housekeeping and home furnishing, keeping her own name or her initials, IFT, for general subjects and interviews with prominent women and visiting celebrities. Each month, on the day of publication, she worked until 2.30 am then walked with the copy to the printers', getting to know the policeman on the beat so well that he often accompanied her.²²

The first issue of *Woman's World: an illustrated monthly for Australian women*, published on 1 December 1921, was an impressive, well-illustrated publication of 40 pages, described by Taylor as 'neither a fashion journal nor a society paper', non-sectarian and non-political. She promised 'the latest developments in the world of women', interviews with prominent women, coverage of individual women in work and sport, the activities of women's societies, women's work in professions, trades and crafts, and articles on domestic architecture and labour-saving devices. Several series began in the issue, including 'Palette and pen', on art, craft and books, and another on child and baby care. Within a few issues the monthly magazine included children's stories by the well-known author and journalist Mary Grant Bruce and articles on music and the theatre.

Features for country women

From the start, *Woman's World* set out to appeal to country women. In the first issue, Taylor described her ride from the state boundary to the capital in 1916, which had left her with the memory of scores of women pioneers and an insight into their problems and trials. During one stop she had invented a milk cooler from a kerosene tin for a sick mother,²³ and many women had entrusted her with requests for goods and services not available in the country. She was asked where to buy a certain type of baby's feeding bottle, where to locate a pipe of 'truly weird and wonderful' design for a wife to give to her husband and for information on the quality of material of a dress in a catalogue. When she got to Melbourne she fulfilled these requests and many others, but there had been one she could not fulfil, from a young country girl who wanted her to check on the whereabouts and faithfulness of her lover, who had left the bush for Melbourne and had not been heard from since.²⁴

These requests made a big impact and became part of Taylor's plans for her publication. She undertook to provide practical solutions through a 'special buying service' to overcome the inability of country women 'to personally conduct' their shopping.²⁵ Taylor knew 'the mothers in the bush', a friend wrote, and would take endless pains for 'a woman in a shack in the Mallee



Front cover, *Woman's World of Australia: an illustrated monthly for Australian women*, Melbourne: Woman's World, 1921. The first edition of *Woman's World*.

with £1 to spend'.²⁶ She also offered to purchase articles from contributors on women in all fields of work, labour-saving schemes, household management, current issues concerning women and 'bright Australian sketches'. Gradually she built up a stable of regular contributors, and she engaged women canvassers to sell subscriptions in country districts. A friend who witnessed the start of *Woman's World* wrote of 'the trials and tribulations, the alarums and excursions and the amazing enthusiasm and bravery of its growing years'.²⁷

Appeal to independence

Intermittently Taylor shared with her readers her experience of buying a rural block of land on the outskirts of Melbourne and building a simple country retreat to which to escape at weekends. She portrayed herself as part of a movement among single women who were acquiring cheap 1-acre blocks in the Dandenong Ranges, 35 kilometres east of Melbourne, on which they



Frances Taylor at Kangaroo Ground, Victoria, *The Australian Woman's World: a town & country journal for Australian women*, Melbourne: *Woman's World*, February 1934, p. 7. Photographer unknown

planned to build small shacks. She described 'scores of mountain cottages of quaint artistic design owned by bachelor women', and she wrote of five cottages in one spot alone in the hills, in what became known as Spinster Crescent.²⁸ Each weekend, after donning breeches and riding boots, a soft shirt and slouch hat, she would catch the last train on Friday night or the first train on Saturday morning on the north-east line from the city to Hurstbridge, 30 kilometres away. Leaving the train at Wattle Glen, the second-last stop, she would catch and harness her pony, Tommy, whom she left in the paddock of friends, and drive in her dog cart up the narrow, winding tree-lined road 'in the eerie darkness or the pale sunshine of a frosty morning' to Kangaroo Ground. Later she followed the same routine in her small motorcar.²⁹

The prominence of travel articles in the early issues of *Woman's World* catered for a desire among women for freedom, independence and escape from convention. Just a few months after the start of the monthly magazine, Taylor began publishing a series of articles on islands in the Pacific written by an intrepid Melbourne woman traveller, Flos Greig, who had earlier become the first woman to graduate in law in Victoria. Greig travelled with her companion Alys Jones to Norfolk Island, the New Hebrides and New Caledonia writing articles about their adventures, which were published between April and October 1922.³⁰ As though impatient to rival her friend, while she was still publishing this series, Taylor set off on her own adventure, to write articles on New Guinea, a brave step for an editor and manager of a recently begun periodical with a still uncertain future.



Frances Taylor's mountain hut (detail). From *Woman's World of Australia: an illustrated monthly for Australian women*, Melbourne: Woman's World, 1921, p. 31

The former German New Guinea was an unknown exotic land to most Australians. It had been seized by Australian naval forces at the start of World War I and under the post-war Treaty of Versailles had become an Australian Mandated Territory. In the capital, Rabaul, Taylor, dressed in a male disguise of a tropical riding costume and the helmet of an Australian army officer, set out to explore the 'restlessness, wickedness and mystery' of Chinatown after dark. By day, Chinatown was the chief business centre and an important trading post. At night, vice was an allure amid the throbbing sounds, lights and scents of crowded streets and ramshackle buildings. As Taylor explored the network of alleyways through wafts of incense and opium, she found much to write about. Chinatown was 'openly wicked', she wrote, but nowhere did she mention the other 'vice'³¹: brothels, prostitution and sex slavery may not have been the usual fare in women's pages in the 1920s, but it is surprising that she did not raise the subject, which was of concern to women's groups in Australia and overseas.

Taylor's other major adventure was in the Witu Islands, a sparsely populated volcanic group in the Bismarck Sea. She borrowed a Macassan pony to ride through thick jungle tracks to explore an area whose native population was still decimated by the effects of a smallpox epidemic a generation before and whose European population consisted of only five males and no females.³²

Back in Rabaul she dressed more conventionally to interview newsworthy women, including Agnes Wisdom, wife of the administrator Brigadier General



Front cover, *Woman's World of Australia: a town & country journal for Australian women*, Melbourne: Woman's World, October 1926. Illustration by Margaret Preston, © Margaret Preston/Copyright Agency, 2019

Evan Wisdom; Mrs Kaumann, who ran an extensive coconut plantation near Rabaul; and an altruistic young woman, Margaret Bechervaise, who had left a teaching career in Geelong, south-west of Melbourne, to teach children in a small isolated village on the coast of Papua.³³ On the way home to Melbourne, Taylor travelled in the Northern Territory and across the vast Nullarbor Plain, in southern Australia, writing about people and places almost as unknown and inaccessible to Australian readers in the early 1920s as the inhabitants of New Guinea.³⁴

Woman's World continued the travel theme with another series by Flos Greig from Java, Batavia (Jakarta), Sourabaya and Bali and from Singapore, Penang and Rangoon.³⁵ When she returned, Greig gave lectures illustrated with lantern slides, and talks on radio, across Australia.

Catering for the desire of women to savour independence, Taylor incorporated many articles on motoring, including a page of photographs of women in their Austin 7s opposite an article on 'Driving the light car',³⁶ an interview with the first woman to race her own car in a motor dome, and others on repairing and maintaining a motorcar. In 1927 Taylor related her own motoring adventure of driving from Melbourne to Canberra in her Austin 7 to attend the opening on 9 May of federal parliament by Prince Albert, duke of York. She described her happiness and that of other car travellers from Victoria, after negotiating 800 kilometres of meandering bush roads, when they gathered at night around a camp fire in a paddock near the new building. 'The greatest discomforts were laughed at, mud and water were wiped from the engine, broken springs were mended with wire, hungry motorists shared their biscuits, everything was worthwhile to that band of enthusiasts', she wrote.³⁷

The best years of *Woman's World*

In its first eight years *Woman's World* was a vibrant magazine reflecting Taylor's original ambition for her publication. Interstate news and features widened its national appeal, and even in Sydney it was described as 'the finest woman's paper being produced in Australia to-day'.³⁸ Attractively designed, with a good-quality photographic coverage, *Woman's World* made a feature of its modernist designed covers, including flower woodprints by Margaret Preston,³⁹ which became collectors' items. Readers' attention was maintained by frequent announcements of new features and series by new writers. There were articles on a woman cartoonist, the youngest woman barrister in Victoria, a woman marine engineer, three women pioneers in film production, and women naturalists. Australian women delegates to overseas conferences were almost invariably featured and often contributed accounts of their experiences.⁴⁰

When commercial radio stations began broadcasting, Taylor grasped the opportunity to widen the appeal of her publication. Just a few months after Melbourne radio station 3UZ began transmitting on 8 March 1925, she became a pioneer in the use of radio as a means of contact with readers and of gaining publicity. Soon her *Woman's World Morning Tea Hour*, broadcast each weekday at 11 am, was a popular feature.⁴¹ 'She sensed the value of wireless broadcasting as a means of friendship', Anna Brennan wrote.⁴²

As *Woman's World* reached a peak in performance, Taylor's achievement as the founder and editor became better known to the public. This occurred in a striking manner when she came to the notice of delegates at the Third



Frances Taylor broadcasting on 3UZ, *The Australian Woman's World: a town & country journal for Australian women*, Melbourne: Woman's World, February 1934, p. 6.
Photographer unknown.

Imperial Press Conference, a major international event in Australia in 1925, which generated no fewer than five books.⁴³ At the Melbourne session, held over 29–30 September and 1 October, as delegates from many countries in the British Empire listened to a speaker describe British feminist Margaret Haig Mackworth, Lady Rhondda, as unique in being a female founder of a London weekly, *Time and Tide*, they were surprised when an interjector told them that Melbourne's Frances Taylor was not only the founder but the editor and business manager of *Woman's World*.

The following year, Taylor and Kathleen Gilman Jones, headmistress of Melbourne Church of England Girls' Grammar School, were chosen to represent the Victorian Women's Citizen Movement at two international conferences in Europe. Leaving Mary Grant Bruce as acting editor of *Woman's World*, Taylor attended the 10th congress of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, held in Paris from 30 May to 6 June 1926, and a few weeks later the Women's Empire Conference on 'Migration and the Woman Citizen', organised by the British Commonwealth League, in London.⁴⁴ In England, Taylor had the opportunity to follow up the comparison between her publication and *Time and Tide* when she met Lady Rhondda. She described *Time and Tide* as the only other independent woman-owned magazine in the world apart from

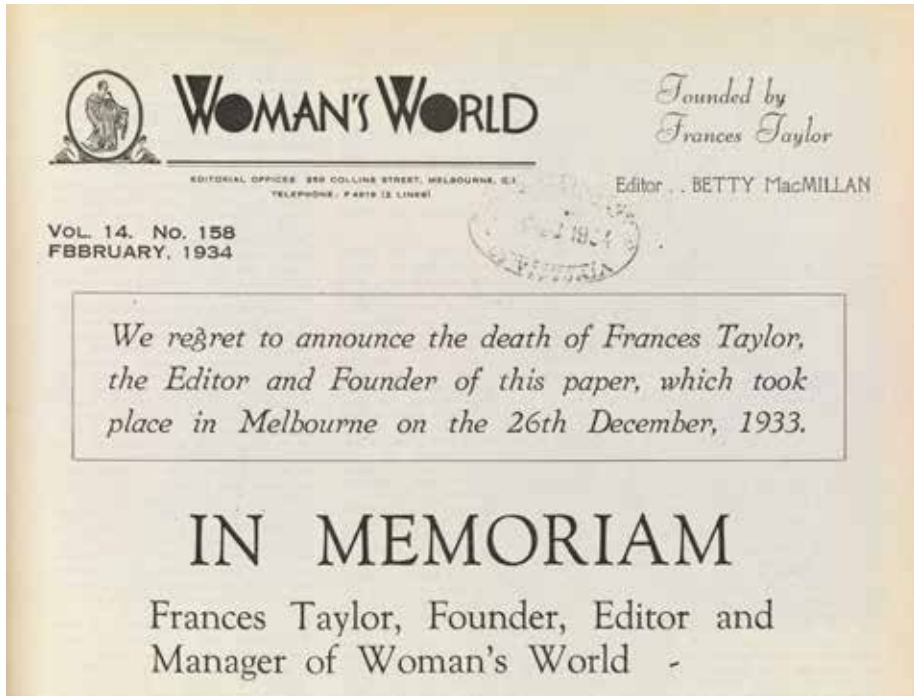
her own. In a world survey, *Time and Tide* concluded that Taylor's position as founder, editor and business manager of a women's magazine was unique. Taylor worked for a month in Fleet Street, the home of most British national newspapers, then for another month joined a friend from the Lyceum Club, journalist Kathleen Syme, touring England and Wales in a Ford lorry.⁴⁵

Headwinds

When *Woman's World* began, the main competition for country readers came from the weekly editions of capital city dailies. In Melbourne, this included the *Leader*, the *Age's* stable mate; the *Australasian*, associated with the *Argus*; and the *Weekly Times*, associated with the *Herald*. In Sydney, the independent *Town and Country Journal* had ceased in 1919, but the *Sydney Mail*, an associate of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, remained. In the latter part of the 19th century, a few crusading women's magazines that had fought for women's rights had been successful, particularly Louisa Lawson's *The Dawn* (1888–1905) and to a lesser extent Maybanke Susannah Wolstenholme's *The Woman's Voice* (1894–95).⁴⁶ But from the early 20th century, a more viable model, published by media interests or established publishers and offering the staples of homemaking, mothercraft, short stories and serials, had taken over the market. By the 1920s, *Woman's Budget*, a Sydney publication based on this model, was selling about 95,000 copies per week.⁴⁷ Interstate competition quickened, when the long-running weekly publication *The Bulletin* started *The Australian Woman's Mirror* in Sydney, on 25 November 1924, and in 1928, when the publishers of the *Everylady's Journal* added to their titles *New Idea*, which is still being published.

But competition was only one of several factors that influenced a change in direction in *Woman's World* towards the end of the decade. Following the onset of the Great Depression, with its collapse in employment and purchasing power, women were forced into drastic economising with food and other household essentials, and this inevitably affected discretionary expenditure, including the buying of a relatively high-priced monthly journal. Taylor used her radio program to foster a sense of unity and inclusion in a shared purpose, inviting her listeners to help each other by passing on economy hints and recipes, which she broadcast and then publicised in *Woman's World* in the column 'Let's help each other'. Ideas came from all parts of the country and from suburban and country housewives. One reader sent in a recipe for 'mock duck' which resulted in so many recipes for 'mock' foods that Taylor wondered on her program whether there were any 'real' meals in her listeners' menus.⁴⁸

This crisis in external events was compounded by Taylor's suffering



Masthead, *The Australian Woman's World: a town & country journal for Australian women*, Melbourne: *Woman's World*, February 1934, p. 5

a grave illness. Her engagement of an editorial assistant in 1929 probably marked the beginning of her decline in health. The woman she chose was Betty MacMillan, born in Childers, Queensland, a daughter of an official in the Colonial Sugar Refining Company, who had grown up in Melbourne and was educated at the Church of England Girls' Grammar. After working in an advertising agency, MacMillan had freelanced briefly as a journalist in London and when she returned to Melbourne had continued freelancing for London and Australian papers until she began working for *Woman's World*. In effect she was assistant editor, but Taylor continued to appear on the title page as the sole editor.⁴⁹

The following year Taylor had an operation for breast cancer, and *Woman's World* relied increasingly on fiction and homemaking articles, although some of its distinguishing features remained, including the buying service for country women. In June 1931 MacMillan was formally named assistant editor; this coincided with the price of the publication being cut in half. While this would appear to be a response to a fall in buyers with a consequent effect on advertisements, Stella Allan wrote that a new printing press had been installed

VOL. 14

NO. 158

THE AUSTRALIAN WOMAN'S WORLD

A TOWN & COUNTRY JOURNAL *for* AUSTRALIAN WOMEN

On sale the last Friday of every Month

1ST FEBRUARY, 1934



"MARGUERITE," by M. Miller



FRANCES TAYLOR MEMORIAL NUMBER

Registered at the General Post Office, Melbourne, for transmission by post as a Newspaper.

Front cover, *The Australian Woman's World: a town & country journal for Australian women*, Melbourne: Woman's World, February 1934

that could cope with increased production.⁵⁰ *Woman's World* began to include more syndicated serials, which as well as being a relatively cheap method of reducing costs also catered for the need among subscribers for escapist reading as diversion from pressing financial problems. By 1931 fiction had pride of place in the contents list.

Taylor's role decreased as her health became worse, and she died on 26 December 1933 in a private hospital in Melbourne from breast cancer. She was buried two days later at Kangaroo Ground cemetery, near her beloved 'hut in the hills', following a service by the Reverend Penry Evans, minister at the Independent Church in Collins Street. Following her death, the *Australasian*, typical of many newspapers, praised her 'unfaltering courage, initiative and understanding' and remarked on her 'personal magnetism', while the *Argus* described her as 'one of the most distinguished figures in journalism in Australia'.⁵¹ *Woman's World* announced her death to readers in the February 1934 issue. Stella Allan wrote an obituary, 'In memoriam', covering her life and achievements, and Molly Trait wrote about her 'home in the hills'. Both were friends from the Lyceum Club's Press Table, and shortly after her death members of the club appealed for donations to 'The Frances Taylor Gift'. Money raised was used to improve the equipment and aftercare of patients in the cancer ward of Melbourne Hospital.⁵² Betty MacMillan was appointed managing editor of *Woman's World*, which was taken over by the *Argus* and published until a few months before the latter closed, in 1954.

In terms of circulation, *Woman's World* was a minor player in the battle for mass readership, and like other women's papers it was dwarfed by the success of *The Australian Women's Weekly*, which by the end of the 1930s had reached a circulation of 400,000.⁵³ The achievement of Frances Taylor was on a lesser but still significant scale. Just getting the first issue of *Woman's World* to the printers' and then preventing it from folding, as did many periodicals begun like hers, without major financial backing, was a remarkable achievement. She proved it was possible to establish a women's periodical aimed at the intelligent woman and not wholly given over to 'social tit-bits, fashion and beauty'.⁵⁴ *Woman's World's* advantage may have been that it came at a time when women were looking ahead, to a world in which they could enjoy not only their homes but some measure of freedom and independence.