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**PROPHETS AND PRIESTS:
CONGREGATIONAL WOMEN IN AUSTRALIA, 1919-1977**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the contribution to Australian history of Congregational women – members of the first Christian denomination to admit women to the ordained ministry in Australia. It seeks to investigate a previously neglected area of historical research and thus contribute to the study of religion and gender within Australian history. It will argue that religion has played an important role in the development of twentieth century feminism and should therefore be reflected in its general histories. The advantage of Congregationalism for women was that it encouraged them to explore and express Christian citizenship through the roles of “prophet” and “priest”. These roles allowed Congregational women scope to pursue reform in their church and in the wider community both on the basis of equality with men and also on the basis of their gender difference. Congregational women gained access to the prophetic role, thus providing a feminist perspective on theology and social issues, which challenged traditional Christian theology that had been developed by men. They sought access to the priestly role to extend their exercise of this prophetic role, but were only partly successful. Where they did gain access to the priestly role their exercise of it had both positive and negative results for themselves, their churches, and the wider society in which they lived. Just as the prophetic role could reflect rather than challenge received ideas, so gaining access to the priestly role could serve to reinforce traditional views, particularly in relation to race, class, and gender. Finally, as the position of the church in the community declined over time and women gained greater access to paid employment, the previous significance of access to the priestly role declined.