

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host Alison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Catherine Freyne. Catherine is a historian and audio producer. She is co curator of an exhibition at the State Library of New South Wales called Pride Revolution. And she joins us today to talk about mountaineer Freda du Faur.

CF: She was an exceptional mountaineer. She was born in the early 1880s in Sydney, and I suppose her mountaineering career got started around 1908. So by then she's just sort of in her mid-20s. The thing about you know, being a mountaineer, you really need to have some mountains to climb and Australia isn't known for its mountains. And Freda didn't know that she had, you know, a particular penchant for mountains until she visited New Zealand. She was accompanying her father and they visited the Southern Alps, which are not too far from Christchurch on the train. And she was just really drawn to this landscape. And they stayed in the Hermitage, which is still there. And that's where all the mountaineers stayed. So the Southern Alps of New Zealand, this is the training ground for you know, very significant climbers in history like Sir Edmund Hillary. And it's a great training ground for the Himalayas actually, because the conditions there are quite similar to those of the Himalayas, but it's all at a much lower altitude. So it's a great sort of mechanism for really getting your chops as a climber without having to battle with the challenges of low oxygen. So it's no wonder that many of the world's greatest climbers actually come from New Zealand. So she got chatting at the Hermitage with a couple of the guides that operated out of there. They were brothers called Peter and Alex Graham, and she was invited to join them, you know, the next day on a low-key climb. And she was absolutely hooked. She loved it. She realizes that in order to do more climbing, she's going to need to get fit. And so she comes back to Australia and she starts training.

So she and her family, they live just in what's now the Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park, and so she would go walking through the Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park. She called it scrambling because it was always kind of clambering over rocks. She took her little dog with her, she loved being in the bush there. But in order to get really fit, she actually attended a gym in Sydney. And there's a gym right down, not far from Circular Quay and they've got gym equipment. And they run classes and women are welcome there, which is quite unusual. In fact, a really important person at the Dupain Institute was Muriel Cadogan. She's around Freda's age and she's a trainer there. She was passionate about about fitness, and particularly fitness for women. So she and Freda start working together on Freda's fitness, and they get together, they become lovers.

AT: The State Library has also commissioned a digital map to go with the Pride Revolution exhibition, called Sporty Lesbians and Fit Feminists, so I'll be sure to link to that in the description.

<https://uploads.knightlab.com/storymaps/2b49515c1ccc97c68b83ce4c05f11c5a/the-sporting-lesbian/index.htm>  
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CF: I mean, I've done lots of work on Freda du Faur in the past as a historian and an audio producer, I made a radio documentary about her maybe a decade ago, and the story has always stayed with me. And I think what's really interesting about Freda is, she's quite famous in New Zealand, so a lot of recognition of her name in New Zealand, very little here. So she really made a mark in the Southern Alps of New Zealand. What her great claim to fame was after she got fit with Muriel in the gym in Sydney, was she was the first woman to climb the highest peak in New Zealand. So that mountain is now called Aoraki, which is the traditional name for it. In her day it was called Mount Cook. It's a pretty serious mountain.

AT: And she also did it in six hours, which was a new record, so she shaved two hours off of the previous time record for that climb.

CF: And that was a pretty amazing achievement. And after that she just kept going season after season in the Southern Alps of New Zealand. You have to climb in the summer, so you have to climb basically around December and when I say summer it doesn't mean that it's not, you know, really icy conditions. It's extremely icy and cold but impossible to do entirely in winter. And some of the ascents that she made were absolute

*firsts, you know, not just the first woman, she was actually the first person to climb a lot of these peaks in that area. And she even named some mountain peaks, well she named several and one or two of them the names that she gave them related to her relationship with Muriel, one of them for example, she called Cadogan Peak, that was Muriel's surname. She actually wrote a book about her climbing much later. And it's very clear from the way that she wrote about climbing that it was just her vocation. It filled her with a sense of completeness and joy. She was just compelled to ascend. It just gave her such a high.*

*So it doesn't surprise me that she was kind of faster, faster than anyone else. The other curious thing. She always had guides with her. So those those brothers, Peter Graham and Alex Graham, particularly Peter, I think he was having her main guide. Of course they were there with her every step of the way. So it's funny, isn't it, this culture around amateur climbing. I mean, it was something that wealthy people did, and local guides took them, so like the local guides are doing the climbing as well, but it's the amateur that is paying for those guides that gets the glory and we've seen this of course in the Himalayas as well with the Sherpas. But certainly that dynamic was even happening in New Zealand which is which is kind of interesting.*

*AT: And it's funny that you bring that up because I know there was a fair bit of pearl-clutching at the Hermitage when people found out that she was planning to, you know, go on these excursions overnight, unchaperoned with men and you know for example, she had to climb in a skirt to try and forestall some of the complaints that she was getting. And ironically, she ended up having to pay a porter to accompany them, which, I mean, to my mind that's just one more man that she's out there with. And she later wrote, "I agreed to this but felt vindictive when I thought of the extra expense entailed and threatened to send the bill to my tormentors. I sighed not for the first time in my existence over the limits imposed upon me by the mere fact that I was unfortunate enough to be born a woman. I would like to see a man asked to pay for something he neither needed nor wanted when he had been hoarding up every penny so that he need not be cramped for want of funds."*

*CF: No, absolutely. I appreciated those reflections that she made in the book as well about how ridiculous it was that she had to go to this extra expense.*

*AT: And she was only able to afford to pay for her climbing career because she was fortunate enough to have an inheritance from her aunt.*

*CF: Her mother's maiden name was Woolley and the Woolleys were important in early Sydney. Emmeline never married. Her partner was Ethel Pedley, who is famous for having written *Dot and the Kangaroo*. So Emmeline and Ethel Pedley shared many decades together until Ethel died and you know there are newspaper reports of how they lived together and hosted together and went traveling, you know, went on holiday together. Of course there's nothing written saying these these their lovers but you know, certainly Freda du Faur's biographer Sally Irwin draws that conclusion quite reasonably. They had kind of a bit of a salon network so they would, you know, get together and share ideas and it's a really interesting little glimpse into, I guess this culture of educated women, some of whom are certainly queer in this period in Sydney, and when Emmeline died, she left all of her wealth to young Freda. Freda came from a reasonably well-off family. But this money that she inherited from Emmeline meant that it was really her discretionary money, she could do what she wanted with it. And so she, she devoted those funds to, you know, pursuing her passion. But the 20th century really sort of starts to intervene for freedom. And so World War One occurs which really puts the kibosh on things like climbing. And in fact, Freda and Muriel set out for England around this time, and you know, this is what a lot of Antipodeans, especially you know Antipodeans with some money, did. They went to explore the world, basing themselves in England. And Freda and Muriel spent some time in England, and they got involved in various causes. Because it was wartime, lots of opportunities were opening up for women in employment and I know Muriel Cadogan did lots of different jobs when they were living in England. Freda wrote her book, *The Conquest of Mount Cook*, in this time.*

Now, what Freda du Faur's biographer, Sally Irwin, found when she was researching Freda's life is that there was lots of information about Freda up to the time that she stopped climbing. And then it was just really kind of the, you know, the leads went cold. It was really hard to work out what happened to Freda later in her life. But you know, she pieced things together, kept kept on with the research and found some extraordinary things about Freda's later life. So tragically after her last ascent in in New Zealand, you know, just just before the First World War, I think, you know, Freda was imagining that she would climb internationally, that she would be able to explore other parts of the world and climb some mountains abroad. But that wasn't to be. I mean, I guess during wartime that was all pretty impossible.

But evidently, the wheels kind of began to fall off at some point. So in terms of Muriel's mental health, and so we need to sort of fast forward now to like 1929, Freda wrote a long account of what happened. Basically, Freda and Muriel were sharing their life, they were living together. And Muriel had some kind of psychiatric breakdown, and Freda was caring for her, but it was it was getting out of hand, like it sounds like Muriel was really quite, you know, delusional and psychotic. And so Freda took Muriel to a doctor. By this stage, she was like completely worn down herself and really exhausted. You know, she'd been sort of kept up all night and you know, but this had been going on for months. So they take Muriel away. Freda is of course pretty keen to have access to Muriel and at first the medical staff, you know, allow her access, visits on one or two days but then, but then they they say no, you can't see her. You can't see her, she's got the flu and so they kind of withhold Freda's access to Muriel. Meanwhile, Freda is encouraged to have a rest cure herself. And she doesn't really exactly remember what happened. But essentially, you know, she lost some time so you know, I mean, there's historical work that's been done on on this kind of, you know, deep sleep therapy essentially is what it was involving medicating people, you know, to a very high degree and just making them sleep for most. like for a 24 hour cycle, they might sleep for 18 or 20 hours, so Freda was subjected to this so called cure herself. She was told that she had a hedonistic persuasion inverted, this is what she was diagnosed. So an inversion in those days, that was the word used by doctors to describe lesbian tendencies. So, you know, we assume that the doctors realized that Freda and Muriel were actually, you know, life partners, and separated them gave them, gave at least Freda, this diagnosis of a hedonistic persuasion inverted and subjected her to this terrible drug therapy. And when she woke up from it, she was denied access to Muriel. She was told that Muriel's family had been contacted in Australia and that her sister was going to come and pick her up and take her take her back to Australia.

And, yeah, Freda just had no recourse. She had no rights at all. And sure enough, Muriel sister came from Australia and took Muriel away and on a ship returning to Australia, Muriel died from heat prostration so this was the cause of death, heat prostration.

And, you know, all of this is kind of quite mysterious. You know, as a historian, you look at these things and you try and get your head around, like what does that even mean? But you know, the investigations that Freda's biographer Sally Irwin made talking to doctors and so on, understood this in terms of this, you know, excessive drug therapy that Muriel had been subjected to basically a heart attack and she was 45 years old, and she was a very fit healthy person before this psychiatric break and this medical intervention. So Freda lost Muriel, Muriel died tragically and really the grief from this and the outrage from this is what seems to have really colored the rest of Freda's days. So this was 1929, Freda actually died in 1935. So her life was was cut short. So she was born in 1882 and died in 1935. So she was still a young woman when she died. She actually took her own life back in Australia. So it's an outrageous story really about people, about women kind of being bent out of shape by the strictures imposed on them by this hetero-patriarchal world that they lived in.

AT: It's interesting to note that while male homosexuality was a matter for the law, like it was actually illegal, female homosexuality seems to have been regulated largely on the psychiatric side, as we've just seen with this story. And that actually makes a lot of sense to me as someone who's read a lot of women's history, because throughout this period in particular, we see a lot of women being committed to asylums for any behavior that society doesn't like. So whether that's being pregnant out of wedlock, being a lesbian or just being shrewish. Any of those things could get you committed to an asylum and imprisoned against your will. So

*from that perspective, it actually makes a lot of sense as to the different ways that homosexuality was addressed by society depending on gender.*

*And in this case, in particular, the doctors actually told Freda that the mental illness was a direct result of her lesbianism and that Muriel's being a lesbian must be Freda's fault, so they were blaming her for Muriel's condition.*

*Muriel had also left everything that she owned to Frida in her will, but her family actively tried to block that inheritance and the doctor was also so shady. He was actually charging hundreds and hundreds of pounds, that the family tried to leave out of Muriel's estate, so he was financially benefiting from the patient that he was clearly you know, mistreating and taking advantage of.*

*CF: It's such a sad story, isn't it? And I know and I wish it ended on a brighter note, but it's just their lives were cut short by this, it was a life and death matter and the behavior of Muriel's family, it's just absolutely tragic. This theme of estate rights and relationship recognition for queer people, and the history of that is something that actually is a thread in our exhibition. And you know, it's really only very recently that the legislation has really equalized in terms of its treatment of heterosexual couples and same-sex couples. The story of Freda and Muriel is an outrageous case study in the unfairness of the regime, you know, before all of the slow incremental improvements that began to happen from from about the 1990s onwards.*

*AT: And we also see that when Freda herself died, she wanted to leave her estate to a young woman named Frances Lord. This wasn't romantic. She was just a protege that she'd taken under her wing. And her own family then tried to block that inheritance as well. When you know, she really just wanted to provide this young woman with the same independence and freedom that her own aunt had given to her. And it's also worth noting that they went against her wishes to be cremated and had her buried, but they apparently didn't even bother giving her a gravestone. Her grave actually went unmarked for decades. And it was only after Sally Irwin's biography *Between Heaven and Earth*, was released in 2000 that she started to get a bit more attention in Australia while you know in New Zealand, she's still relatively well known.*

*CF: Yeah, it's just women's history, they're frequently written out of history. It's completely outrageous.*

*AT: I've also noticed a lot of families fighting for someone's legacies. You see this a lot with widows and children. And from sounds of it, her family wasn't terribly supportive, in terms of the people who survived her.*

*CF: I think the queerness comes in there as well. Yeah, I guess when women are breaking out of the conventions, there's actually sort of shame around these stories within families quite frequently. So that's another reason why they're not celebrated, as you say.*

*So what happened with Freda's gravestone is that Sally Irwin's book was published, which was the biography of Freda du Faur. This was of interest particularly in New Zealand because Freda du Faur was quite a well-known name. And a kiwi called Ashley Gualter read Sally's biography of Freda, and he was visiting, he learned that Freda's grave was unmarked. So he was in Sydney and he went to visit Manly Cemetery where she was buried and discovered, yep, there's just this unmarked grave and so he sort of joined heads with a friend of his who was a journalist in New Zealand, and he wrote a story about it and they got a bit of a campaign going to somehow mark Freda's gravesite in an appropriate way.*

*And so they got a donation from a stonemason of a piece of greywacke stone, which is you know, geologically from this the area where that the Southern Alps are, where Freda loved to climb.*

*And, yeah, they were able to create a tombstone out of this greywacke stone. In fact, it's almost in the shape of Mount Cook, or Aoraki. So that's very appropriate for Freda. So, yeah, as Ashley said when I interviewed him, she's got a few people battling for her now, which she didn't really have at the end of her life.*

*AT: And I think in your documentary for ABC Radio National, there was a line about, because of the environment that she grew up with, with her, you know, supportive parents and her aunt and her aunt's circle of feminists, essentially that she grew up with the idea that she could do anything and she was deeply annoyed that society kept trying to get in her way.*

*CF: Yeah, that's right. Yeah. And I guess that's the legacy or the generational difference between her and her aunt. Emmeline. So, Emmeline was such an important influence in her life, like Emmeline and her and her friends, and those women fought for suffrage. And Freda inherited that enfranchised state and understood that the world was her oyster and there was no valid reason that she shouldn't participate in these activities, including mountain climbing that men were doing. It's interesting to sort of think about the progress that happened just over the course of the early 20th century, then with the experience of World War One where suddenly women were required to work in non-traditional employment in jobs that that men usually held. So, understandings of what women were capable of was just completely, a very dynamic time in terms of first wave feminism, isn't it? And she's a beneficiary of that.*

*AT: And Freda herself saw the impact of her mountaineering and the attention that it brought within a few years of her own climb. She wrote, "five years after my first fight for individual freedoms, the girl climber at the Hermitage need expect nothing worse than raised eyebrows when she starts out unchaperoned and clad in climbing costume. It is some consolation to have achieved as much as this and to have blazed one more little path through ignorance and convention, and added one tiny spark to the ever growing beacon lighted by the women of this generation to help their fellow travelers climb out of the dark woods and valleys of conventional tradition and gain the fresh, invigorating air and wider viewpoint of the mountaintops."*  
*And I think that's as good a place as any to end our conversation. So thank you once again to Catherine Freyne for joining us to talk about Freda du Faur and join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast. Remember, well behaved women rarely make history.*