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**THE MEASURE OF THE WOMAN: EUGENICS AND  
DOMESTIC SCIENCE IN THE 1924 SOCIOLOGICAL  
SURVEY OF WHITE WOMEN IN NORTH  
QUEENSLAND**

**Thesis submitted by**

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on February 11 2008**

**for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the School of Arts and Social Sciences  
James Cook University**

## **Abstract**

This thesis considers experiences of white women in Queensland's north in the early years of 'white' Australia, in this case from Federation until the late 1920s. Because of government and health authority interest in determining issues that might influence the health and well-being of white northern women, and hence their families and a future white labour force, in 1924 the Institute of Tropical Medicine conducted a comprehensive Sociological Survey of White Women in selected northern towns. Designed to address and resolve concerns of government and medical authorities with anxieties about sanitation, hygiene and eugenic wellbeing, the Survey used domestic science criteria to measure the health knowledge of its subjects: in so doing, it gathered detailed information about their lives. Guided by the Survey assessment categories, together with local and overseas literature on racial ideas, the thesis examines salient social and scientific concerns about white women in Queensland's tropical north and in white-dominated societies elsewhere and considers them against the oral reminiscences of women who recalled their lives in the North for the North Queensland Oral History Project. Ultimately, the combination of sources enables an examination of the application of prevailing racial ideas and the development of a broad social history of 1920s North Queensland women.

## Statement of Sources

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education.

Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

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## Statement of Access

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## **Acknowledgement of Contributions & Assistance**

This project could not have begun or completed without the funding that James Cook University provided through a Postgraduate Research Scholarship. Scholarship funds covered fees, project and travel costs, technical and administrative support and office space, brought me into an outstanding academic community and enabled a remarkable journey into the past. I am thankful for this assistance and the opportunities it provided.

In addition, the work for this thesis has been assisted by a number of people whose informal contribution and willingness to share research findings are not adequately recognised in the footnotes and bibliography, particularly May Abernethy (NQOHP Curator), volunteers at Townsville Museum and Historical Society, staff at the Fryer Library, John Oxley Library, Queensland Archives, the QCWA and the Sisters of Mercy. The technical assistance of James Cook University IT and Library staff is also acknowledged with gratitude.

Born of undergraduate fascinations with women's history, the history of disease and the spread and adoption of ideas throughout the layers of societies, this thesis began to take shape after my discovery of Lori Harloe's reference to the Survey and the realisation that it was possible to integrate all of my interests in one work. In its embryonic and later stages it depended heavily on the guidance and patience of my supervisors Diane Menghetti and Russell McGregor, to whom I am deeply grateful. At the same time, it invaded my home and personal space in a way that was difficult to predict and probably more difficult to endure, despite the protests otherwise of several special people who soon learned how to shift large piles of paper without getting them out of order and to ask any question at least three times when my head was bent. Moreover, they did so for over four years. For that reason, I dedicate this work to Matthew, Pia and Hannah, with love and thanks.



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