



Sarah Ann Jenyns (1865-1952): The Life, Hardships and Successes of a Woman Who Designed a World-Acclaimed Corset and Forged a Company That Continued for Four Generations

Patricia Anne Jenyns

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Patricia Anne Jenyns's biography, *Sarah Ann Jenyns*, is an inspirational and historical account of an esteemed entrepreneur.

Sarah Ann Jenyns was the original supermom. The mother of seven became an icon of female empowerment by designing and creating a revolutionary corset. Surprisingly, Sarah was no glamorous fashionista. Her inspiration came from her own back pain, for which she attempted to use a belt to apply pressure. Frustrated and looking for relief, she consulted surgeons through her husband's surgical equipment business.

By learning from the firsthand experience of the pain and restrictiveness of Edwardian corsets, Sarah provided a freeing alternative that was slimming and, most importantly, supportive and not damaging. Thanks to her shrewd business sense, her hard work and innovation paid off in spades in an era when women entrepreneurs were few and far between.

A significant amount of this short book is made up of primary sources: early black-and-white photos of towns and people, epistolary exchanges, patents, and other legal documents. These are not edited or abridged, but provided in full—a choice that gives the work a haphazard feeling, and detracts from the book's portrait of Sarah as a real, dimensional figure.

Sarah's husband Dolph is sourced via a transcribed journal that details the family trekking around Australia. His portion of the text is fascinating, if rambling, and captures the unassuming family from a first-person perspective. Notably, Sarah is hardly quoted. Letters between Sarah's eldest son, Herbert, and his sister Sadie are also included; they are sweet and warm, a welcome contrast to the dry tone of most of the book.

Though the author is related to her subject, the book's tone is unbiased, formal, and scholarly, focused on Sarah's unlikely success story, as well as on the cracks beneath her remarkable accomplishments. Sarah's commitment to doing what was best for her business caused deep rifts between her and a few of her children, and virtually destroyed her marriage.

The book faithfully shows this strife without delving into details. There are no personal accounts of these relationships with Sarah, only timelines and court documents of who accused whom. The result is a somewhat unsatisfying, though undoubtedly informative, true account of a family grappling with the complex dynamics of a family business. Jenyns gives the facts without judgment or speculation, though perhaps also with too little color.

This biography is a galvanizing call to aspiring entrepreneurs, and is an informative historical portrait of a family business.

PAIGE VAN DE WINKLE (March 29, 2018)

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