



ALISON MACKINNON

# WOMEN, LOVE AND LEARNING

THE DOUBLE BIND

This book tells the story of a generation of American and Australian women who embodied – and challenged – the prescriptions of their times. In the 1950s and early 60s they went to colleges and universities, trained for professions and developed a life of the mind. They were also urged to embrace their femininity, to marry young, to devote themselves to husbands, children and communities. Could they do both? While they might be seen as a privileged group, they led the way for a multitude in the years ahead. They were quietly making the revolution that was to come.

Did they have ‘the best of all possible worlds’? Or were they caught in a double bind? Sylvia Plath’s letters tell of her delighted sense of life opening before her as a ‘college girl’. Her poetry, however, tells of anguish, of reaching for distant goals. Drawing on interviews, surveys, reunion books, letters, biographical and autobiographical writing from both American and Australian women, this cultural history argues that the choices that faced educated women in that time led to the revolution of the late 1960s and 70s. Something had to give. There are lessons here for today’s young women, facing again conflicting expectations. Is it possible, they ask, to ‘have it all’?

“This book asks insightful and provocative questions about women who came of age in the 1950s in Australia and the US. Its exploration of the impact of higher education on 1950s women students in both countries highlights critical differences in awareness of women’s issues in the so-called conformist decade”.

Jill Ker Conway,  
author of *The Road from Coorain*

**ALISON MACKINNON** is Professor Emerita at the University of South Australia and a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia. Her extensive publications on women, education, and the changing life course include the prize winning *Love and Freedom: Professional women and the reshaping of personal life* (1997). She has held fellowships at Rutgers University, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Newnham College Cambridge, Umeå University, and the Australian National University.

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PETER LANG

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Janus could be called her god,  
as she spends most of her college years  
looking in two directions.

Dean Nancy Lewis 'College women and their proper spheres', *Journal of the American Association of University Women*, 47(4), 1954, p. 210.

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*Janus face Alice with teapot crown* 1956

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# Contents

Acknowledgements .....	9
Introduction .....	13
1 Who was she? Surveying the educated woman: posture photos, beauty queens, dormitory rules and achievement motivation.....	29
2 Conservative times: Cold War, hot sex and the consumer revolution.....	65
3 The experience: peer culture or academics?.....	105
4 Life after college: a problematic realm.....	143
5 From <i>Mademoiselle</i> to <i>Ms</i> magazine: mainstreamers, continuity and premature liberationists .....	181
Conclusion: It's deja vu all over again? .....	213
A note on sources and method.....	229
Bibliography .....	235
Index .....	251



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the reminders of times long forgotten that interviews and permission inquiries have elicited. The past, particularly the past of the 50s and early 60s, is definitely a foreign country.

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This book is dedicated to my granddaughters Georgie and Skye in the hope that by the time they grow up they will no longer find themselves facing the double bind.

Alison Mackinnon, 2010



# Introduction

Any era that is simultaneously as dynamic, as glorious, as conflict-ridden, and as traumatic as the 1950s and 1960s were will have many rememberers.<sup>1</sup>

What a luxury this is – I wrote in my diary in December 2000 – to walk alone in frost-edged woods on a crisp New England day. The river is frozen in part, with white floes strange to my Australian eyes. The winter woods do not lack colour: the crisp brown leaves, a quick crackle and a grey squirrel flits away, red berries, white birch trunks. Walking back through a venerable and well-endowed campus, with gardens, ponds, statuary and a sense of solidity and entitlement, I feel the joy of life and the wonder of being a woman with work to do in such an environment. Yet I had also enjoyed a privileged moment in time as a student in Australia at a women’s residential college in an era that now seems as far off as the nineteenth century. I too am a rememberer.

Dipping into women’s lives in the 1950s and early 1960s at Smith College I found many echoes of my own and a few differences. We shared, most of us, a lack of urgency about careers, a feeling that we would inevitably marry and produce children, be interesting wives to be sure, but wives nevertheless when that word still was a matter of pride. We shared a love of learning, of diving into literature, history, languages for their own sake, often for pleasure rather than for grades. After all there were plenty of jobs and few of us would be encouraged to take higher degrees. We thought we were individuals but we shared the uniforms of the time: Bermuda shorts at Smith, twin sets with Peter Pan collars at Janet Clarke Hall. Cashmere sweaters were universally desired except by that small minority who signalled rebellion,

1 Neil Smelser, quoted in Clark Kerr, with Marian Gade and Maureen Kawaoka, *The gold and the blue: a personal memoir of the University of California, 1949–1967, volume two: political turmoil*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2003, p. xxii.

even then, with sloppy joes and bare feet. How did that world change between my generation of women students and the young women so purposeful, so busily planning their careers, who now throng the Smith campus, and the campus of my old university in Melbourne?

When did the world change for twentieth century women? Was it when Betty Friedan's *The feminine mystique* was published in 1963? Friedan was a student at Smith College, albeit at an earlier time. Or was it with the publication of Germaine Greer's *The female eunuch* in 1970? Greer trod the grounds of my alma mater, the University of Melbourne, drank coffee at 'the caf' and had become a legend by the time I got there. Was it with the introduction of the Pill? Let us arbitrarily decide on a date – 1965 – and see what that produces. In Australia Sir Robert Menzies was the prime minister and the Rolling Stones toured the country. Aboriginal activist Charles Perkins led the Freedom Ride through country New South Wales. In the US the Vietnam War caused turmoil in the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson and civil rights activists stormed the South. In 1964 on the campus of the University of California at Berkeley the free speech movement had galvanized rebelling students. Could life ever be the same?

Was this turmoil anticipated? Stephen Graubard, reflecting on 40 years of the journal *Daedalus*, claimed that many issues reveal much about the time in which they were published. None revealed more than the Fall 1964 issue, 'The Contemporary University: U.S.A'. 'It would be correct to say that this was almost the last moment when one could still believe that the American universities were essentially sound', he wrote, 'that no major troubles were impending. Indeed, there is something almost alarming in the quiescence, the sense of security and stability that permeates the greatest number of the essays in this issue, so different from what was written and said only a few years later.'<sup>2</sup> This could equally be said of the Spring 1964 issue of *Daedalus* on women. It boldly declared feminism moribund.

I am not the first to choose 1965 as a turning point. French demographer Louis Roussel claimed 1965 as 'a rare axis of change', one

2 Stephen R. Graubard, "'Daedalus': forty years on', *Daedalus*, 128, 1999, pp. 22–23.

that led to the ‘banalization’ of previously condemned behaviour.<sup>3</sup> Where might we find evidence of such a transformation? And what did it mean to its participants? The University of California (Berkeley) yearbook of 1965 focused on student protest and free speech. It was the end of an era, the beginning of a more open and sexually liberated climate at universities and colleges. The UC yearbook, *Blue and gold*, looked back at ‘a year filled with a new discontent, a new cause ... the Vietnam question pounded in the hearts of thousands’. It noted that ‘by taking care of their own disciplining, the students of the University of California have proven that they are capable of governing themselves’.<sup>4</sup> But did that inevitably include women? Could women be trusted to discipline themselves?

In the UC-B yearbook the women of the senior class no longer wrote of marrying Ted and raising five children as they had in the early fifties. Now they were women who ‘will travel then attend law school’; ‘will teach junior college, then graduate study’; ‘gain real estate license’; ‘graduate school in social work’.<sup>5</sup> Marriage did not rate a mention. In Australia, where ‘students were being asked to stand up and be counted in political demonstrations on the streets of Adelaide’,<sup>6</sup> obedience to traditional rules seemed increasingly irrelevant. In Brisbane, Queensland, in 1965 two women, ‘wives of university lecturers’ (as they were described in the popular press), chained themselves to the public bar of the Regatta Hotel in protest at women’s exclusion from that important social space.<sup>7</sup> In campuses such as Berkeley, home to a massive and sustained anti-war movement, in Queensland or in South

3 Nancy F. Cott, *Public vows: a history of marriage and the nation*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2002, p. 202.

4 *Blue and gold*, Associated Students of the University of California at Berkeley (ASUC), 1966, p. 117.

5 *Blue and gold*, ASUC, 1952, 1959, 1966.

6 Pauline Payne, *St Ann’s College: the first fifty years, 1947–1997*, St Ann’s College, North Adelaide, 1998, p. 78.

7 Marilyn Lake, *Getting equal: the history of Australian feminism*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1999.

Australia, nothing could have seemed as banal in these turbulent times as a concern with the hours at which women returned to their dorms.

Yet a preoccupation with every detail of women's behaviour and sexuality was a major aspect of the 1950s and early 1960s. University study did not exempt them. Elaborate rules determined the hours at which women students could leave their residences, could socialize, particularly with men, how they should dress and what careers they should consider. Some institutions still had women's wardens. If 1965 marked the end of an era what did that era look like? And what were the seeds of its destruction? Can we detect them in the imaginings and practices of women of the times?

Much has been written about the turbulent changes of the late 1960s. Yet the 1950s and early 1960s have not played a major role in histories of the twentieth century. They are often seen as dreary, suburban, conformist. Those years have been viewed through a Cold War lens, through the rise of consumerism, even by a narrative of growing access to therapy in an increasingly Freudian climate. But what happened to women in the 1950s and early 60s? Were they all confined to the suburbs, to becoming 'station wagon wives', wives and mothers living the consumerist post-Kinsey dreams of the day or, worse, filled with 'suburban neuroses'? Were they waiting, in narcotized sleep, for the words of a Friedan, or a Greer?

Sylvia Plath, poet and mother, could not wait that long. In 1963 she took her own life, overwhelmed with despair. Was her death in some inexplicable way emblematic of the sheer impossibility of the dream: of being a wife and mother and at the same time a fully creative, independent self? Plath struggled with those anxieties at a time in which there was no name for the despair creative women felt, no explanation other than the individual one, no demons other than personal ones. Within the 'bell jar' of neurosis there was no escape. Germaine Greer has claimed that if the new feminists were around in 1963 Sylvia Plath would not have had to commit suicide.<sup>8</sup> This is debatable but Greer herself helped to name

8 George Stade, 'Afterword' in Nancy Hunter Steiner, *A closer look at Ariel: a memory of Sylvia Plath*, Faber and Faber, London, p. 74.

the demons, to enjoin women to stop blaming themselves for unachieved perfection, to name patriarchal society as the enemy.

This book tells the story of a significant group of women who confronted the prescriptions of the times. They went to colleges and universities in increasing numbers, trained for the professions and developed a life of the mind. They expected to be interesting people and to have interesting lives. At the same time they were urged to listen to their hearts, to marry young, to devote themselves to their children and communities. Helen Horowitz has written of the continuing importance up to the 1960s of campus life, a predominantly male culture in which the peer group was vitally important in the formation of student identities in the United States.<sup>9</sup> This campus culture was taken up by women in the 1950s with a major emphasis on romance and sexual attractiveness. That emphasis, some have argued, was so strong that it indirectly eroded women's career identities.<sup>10</sup> Can we find evidence of this? Could women's education, in this context, help them to think outside the square? Would they redefine success? I argue in this book that they were already undertaking the revolution that was to burst onto the English-speaking world in the 1970s.

Higher education for women is a key to social transformation. Education has been seen as both a change agent and as a force for conservatism in the lives of women. Could it be both at once? A consideration of the place of women in higher education inevitably forces a link with wider social, political and economic change. While university women in the 1950s and early 60s could be seen as a privileged cohort, they led the way for a larger number of their sisters in the years ahead. They were the graduates considered as 'reserves' for the labour market – or, worse, as 'wastage' from the system of higher education by administrators concerned with 'manpower' needs of the emerging economy. They attended universities when it was said that 'every boy or girl with the necessary brain power must ... be encour-

9 Helen Horowitz, *Campus life: undergraduate cultures from the end of the eighteenth century to the present*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1987.

10 Dorothy Holland and Margaret Eisenhart, *Educated in romance: women, achievement and college culture*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990.

aged to come forward for a university education'.<sup>11</sup> Yet what girls with the necessary 'brain power' were to do with their education was far from clear.

Can we see this group as a cohort, to use a demographer's word? 'Every birth cohort faces its own historical conditions, alternatives, opportunities, norms with regard to the timing and sequence of demographic events', some claim. 'Each birth cohort will thus go through life with the contemporary social heritage with which it grew up'.<sup>12</sup> In this sense we are talking about a cohort, a specific group, whose heritage was different from those who came before and after. They faced greater transformations in their lives than the generations before, although they were spared world wars or the depression. 'No other single generation of women had its personal foundation so thoroughly jolted', claimed Shelby Moorman Howatt, class of '56 in the US.<sup>13</sup> And their choices were very different from the cohorts to follow. Were they the forerunners of today's young professionals? Were they feminists without 'feminism'? Were they the cohort who prefigured the women's movement? In her recent book *New Jersey dreaming* anthropologist Sherry Ortner claims that 'the feminist movement did not come out of nowhere'. It represented 'a codification and intensification of ideas and practices that were already happening out there in the lives of real women, including the Class of '58'.<sup>14</sup>

- 11 John O'Brien, 'Universities, technology and academic work: a reconsideration of the Murray Committee and Australian universities (1957) in the light of Dawkins (1987-1988)', *Journal of Tertiary Educational Administration*, 12(1), 1990, p. 258.
- 12 Willy Bosveld and Dorien Manting, 'Helena, Lotte, Luisa and Victoria' in Anton Kuijsten, Henk de Gans and Henk de Feijter (eds), *The joy of demography ... and other disciplines: liber amicorum presented to Dirk van de Kaa on the occasion of his retirement as Professor of Demography at the University of Amsterdam*, Thela Thesis, Amsterdam, 1999, p. 127.
- 13 Shelby Moorman Howatt, 'Straddling two worlds (or) thank god we knew how to post', Class of 1958 25th Reunion Book, titled 'Connections', Smith College Archives, p. 11.
- 14 Sherry B. Ortner, *New Jersey dreaming: capital, culture, and the class of '58*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2003, p. 243.

Did they really enjoy the best of all possible worlds, as some have put it?<sup>15</sup> There were fewer expectations and greater opportunities as the economic long boom of the 1970s stretched out ahead. It rarely felt like that at the time. Higher education shaped their future lives in immeasurable ways. Friendships made at university often endured for a lifetime. In writing this story I have already declared my own involvement. I was a young wife in 1965 putting my Bachelor of Arts degree and Diploma of Education to good use as a high school teacher of history, French and English in Melbourne. If I was utterly typical of young educated women of the time I was blissfully unaware of it. My future as the wife of a newly graduated medico seemed entirely a matter of individual choice. I had a miniskirt and a pageboy hairdo and life was exciting. Certainly my horizons as a new graduate did not include the possibility of becoming a university professor: that was unimaginable. But my world view did include an understanding of child and adolescent psychology and an alarming sense that any lack of single-minded devotion to my future children might lead to ‘maternal deprivation’. In that I was fairly typical of the times and my story is a part of this larger narrative.

Drawing on interviews, surveys, reunion books, reports, biographical and autobiographical writing, I consider the lives of American and Australian women for whom new opportunities flowed in the 1970s and 80s. ‘Educated in romance’<sup>16</sup> in many instances, many graduates found early marriage and children insufficient for a full and satisfying life. Those who did not marry frequently found themselves adrift – unclear what their role was in a paired-up society. The contradictions that faced them all in that complex era led to the explosive changes of the late 1960s and 1970s. The combination of glamorous bride, perfect womanhood and educated citizen was too difficult to maintain. Something had to give. While many in the community faced these contradictions, they were much sharper for highly educated

15 Judith Bardwick, ‘The seasons of a woman’s life’ in Dorothy McGuigan (ed.), *Women’s lives: new theory, research and policy*, Ann Arbor Center for Education of Woman, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, 1980.

16 Holland and Eisenhart, *Educated in romance*.

women. They began to question established restraints. Studying this particular group contributes to an understanding of why the women's movement occurred when it did. It also shifts the emphasis from one or two individuals, prominent as they were.

Not all women 'bought into' the romance of the 1950s. Nor did they all follow what Ortner calls the 'girl track'. Some, usually those who came from less privileged backgrounds, used their education to secure a place in the workforce, essential to supporting their families or claiming independence, even to clawing their way out of an oppressed group. Some were serious about careers to better their class position. Women teachers who remained single forged significant career paths at this time. A hardy few knew from the beginning that a life of the mind mattered and that they would pursue it no matter what. Jill Ker Conway, who left Australia to find space for an intellectual life, wrote in her memoir: 'At thirty-three, about to be thirty-four, I saw myself as a scholar ... History was what I did and would do for the rest of my life'.<sup>17</sup> Yet that insight was not always obvious. Germaine Greer, joining the Sydney 'Push', wrote, 'I found what I did not know I was looking for, seriousness and scruple, in the service of the truth'.<sup>18</sup>

In the chapters that follow we see women enjoying their years of learning, struggling with life after campus, redefining their lives as circumstances changed, and reflecting now on a long gone era. We see them struggling to develop student identities as attractive *and* intelligent women, tactfully intelligent, as one put it – a notion that seemed to many a contradiction in terms. Some became leaders, activists and icons, keen to improve the position of women, to offer tempting models of womanhood (Germaine Greer, Jill Ker Conway, Gloria Steinem, for instance). Some, tragically, like Sylvia Plath, had ended their lives by 1965. Others followed mundane paths, but were ready to reinvent themselves at the call of 1970s feminism.

Many enjoyed long and unanticipated careers. What was distinctive to the educational experience in the US, what to Australia? Both

17 Jill Ker Conway, *True north: a memoir*, Vintage Books, New York, 1995, p. 149.

18 Anne Coombs, *Sex and anarchy: the life and death of the Sydney Push*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1996, p. 111.

societies experienced significant upheavals at this time and interesting similarities emerge in the outcomes. Both the United States and Australia gave birth to significant movements of women's liberation. Did the very different political contexts really matter? As we shall see, women in all parts of the English-speaking world dreamed of escape from the cloying circumstances that constrained them. 'Even in the 1950s', American poet Anne Stevenson believed, 'American women were streets ahead of their British counterparts in terms of what they expected of and for themselves'.<sup>19</sup> Were Australian women ahead? In spite of national differences the stories of women's lives at this time are remarkably alike. By drawing from two societies the distinctiveness of each is magnified.

The US experience magnifies the contours of university life. More American women attended colleges or universities than did Australian women. By 1957 one in every five US women attended college. It was becoming a common life experience. By 1965 they were 38.6 percent of the enrolment.<sup>20</sup> By contrast fewer Australian women, indeed fewer young Australians generally, undertook degrees and women represented only 26 per cent of the enrolment by 1965. Their presence could easily be overlooked in large co-educational institutions such as the universities of Melbourne or Sydney.

In the United States women of colour were a significant proportion of college graduates. They led the way in combining work and family, a matter frequently of necessity rather than choice. In Australia, shamefully, Aboriginal women scarcely registered as graduates: a tiny handful attended teachers' colleges in the period. For this reason, women of colour and Aboriginal women do not play a part in this narrative except through their exclusion, which underlines the racially

19 Cited in Janet Malcolm, *The silent woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, Picador, London, 1993, p. 73.

20 Linda Eisenmann, 'Women and postsecondary education in the post WWII United States: expectations and behaviour', paper presented at European Social Science History Association Conference, Berlin, 24–27 March 2004. See also Linda Eisenmann, *Higher education for women in postwar America, 1945–1965*, Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 2006.

privileged role of white women at this time. This exclusion was to animate several of the movements on campus for civil rights in the US, for Aboriginal rights and the abolition of the White Australia Policy in Australia – movements that most often found their genesis in religious clubs such as the YWCA and the Student Christian Movement.<sup>21</sup>

A range of institutions characterized the US scene: they might be Ivy League, public, private, religiously based, co-educational or women-only. In Australia at this time all universities were large co-educational state institutions, and most students were ‘commuters’ in American parlance, travelling to the campus daily on trams and buses. A handful of residential colleges provided for women only, although the single-sex nature of those institutions did not stretch to classes and clubs. But the stories of those who attended them are remarkably the same, with the possible exception of the strong women-only liberal arts colleges of the United States. Here, it can be argued, where a lengthy tradition of strong academic achievement prevailed, the contradictions women faced were even sharper.

For this reason I draw in some depth on the experience of students in women’s colleges. But this was not just the legacy of liberal arts colleges. Lois Banner certainly felt that doors were opening at UCLA in the 1950s. ‘It seemed as though I was learning a powerful language to enter a new world, with the professors its gatekeepers and the good grades I received my ticket of admission’.<sup>22</sup>

Their education took place against a backdrop of significant social currents. The most pervasive was that of the Cold War, a climate that not only reshaped the political and ideological climate but impacted on notions of sexuality, on possible femininities and masculinities. Heterosexuality was reinforced, the nuclear family normalized, any deviating from its prescriptions viewed as subversive and dangerous. Progressive campus clubs shrank or disappeared and ideas of so-

21 See for instance, Renate Howe, *A century of influence: the Australian Student Christian Movement 1896–1996*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2009.

22 Lois W. Banner, *Finding Fran: history and memory in the lives of two women*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1998, p. 109.

cial justice went underground into religious societies and movements. Lecturers learnt to keep their lecture topics within acceptable limits as surveillance on campuses increased.

Linked to this climate was the growth of the social sciences of 'adjustment'. Psychology and sociology reigned supreme and social groups were analyzed and probed. The goal of adjustment was paramount in studies of personality, of marriage and the family, and of social roles. Those not fitting in were viewed as requiring therapy, counselling or psychoanalysis. In the United States an alarming number of young people undertook lengthy psychoanalysis to deal with issues such as weight control, uncertainty as to career goals or inability to deal with family life. While social commentators and popular novelists spoke out against such adjustment and conformity, many colleges and universities supported it directly through parietal rules and indirectly through peer group pressure. While in Australia psychoanalysis was not as prevalent as a solution to life problems, nevertheless at institutions such as the Cairnmillar Institute in Melbourne, Dr Francis McNab began to offer therapy to deal with 'suburban neuroses'. Career guidance for women was usually absent. Where it existed, it served to constrain women's choices to the socially acceptable pathways of the time: teaching, journalism, librarianship and, increasingly, psychology.

The increasing affluence of the period and the growth of rabid consumerism also shaped the lives of young graduate women of the 1950s and early 60s. They were needed in the workforce as schools, universities, media and retail outlets expanded. They were drawn into the growing professions in greater numbers, although rarely with equal reward. On the other hand they were targeted by advertisers and retailers as consumers, prey to the lure of reaching the desired attractiveness of the era, of attaining the desired household objects with which status was increasingly measured.

In spring 1964 US sociologist Alice Rossi declared feminism moribund. There was no overt anti-feminism in American society in 1964 she wrote, not because sex equality had been achieved, but because there was practically no feminist spark left among American

women. 'There are few Noras in contemporary American society', she lamented, 'because women have deluded themselves that the doll's house is large enough to find complete personal fulfilment within it'.<sup>23</sup> Yet all was not dead for feminism even if the younger generation was deaf to its call.

The conflicting currents did not escape the attention of graduate women from an earlier generation, alarmed at what they saw as backward steps for women. The International Federation of University Women (IFUW) resolved in 1955 that: 'An enquiry should be undertaken on the use made by women of their university degrees'. The results of the enquiry, to which both the US and Australia contributed, were placed 'at the disposal of UNESCO and the IFUW representative working on the Legal and Economic Status of Women'. This was serious business to be taken to the highest levels. In Australia the enquiry revealed, *inter alia*, considerable discrimination against women: that, for instance, 'no woman is a professor in an Australian university',<sup>24</sup> that in the Education Department and other government departments 'women who carry a comparable responsibility with men receive only a proportional salary'.<sup>25</sup> Worse, women who married, even those who had attained senior positions, were required to resign and become 'temporary' on marriage. Perhaps there were good reasons for women's low aspirations.

Those who have studied the 'college' women of the period (and I use the term throughout in the broadest possible sense to include universities and the liberal arts colleges in both Australia and the US) all recognize their transitional nature. Some talk of a transitional genera-

23 Alice S. Rossi, 'Equality between the sexes: an immodest proposal', *Daedalus*, 93(2), 1964, p. 608.

24 Australian universities were based on the British system where a department would generally only have one professor, a senior scholar in the field. This is quite different from the US where almost all tenured academics could aspire to the title of professor after several years.

25 Completed questionnaire, Australian Federation of University Women, May, 1957, Papers on Access to Higher Education 1957-67, Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, Canberra, p. 14.

tion, others of a 'swing bridge' between tradition and the explosive era of liberation. They have been described as proto-feminists, as 'premature liberationists' (a term I particularly favour). Others speak of them as the pioneers of multiple roles.<sup>26</sup> Some saw themselves as having always supported equal rights, and were scornful of the new women's movement and what they called its strident tone. Some seemed exempt from the dominant culture of the time. Looking back over their lives many are amazed at the paths they have taken; others are regretful that they did not have the opportunities that young women have today – or, worse, that they did not seize a way forward when they might have, did not have the courage or foresight to take a new path. '[It] makes me feel annoyed with myself over lack of initiative, courage, daring', wrote one woman.<sup>27</sup> Some Noras did slam the door of the doll's house; others regretted their timidity. Some also rearranged the house to their own satisfaction.

Where possible I speak through stories that women have told: in interviews, in their own writing, even in fiction. It is in their personal narratives that the joys and despair of the period fully emerge: the joy of intellectual work, the pleasures – and dangers – of being away from home, the pain of social expectations, the despair of a student forced to leave a hall of residence due to pregnancy, another pregnant young woman who committed suicide. While researching this book I heard stories from a Jewish woman who attributes her feistiness and ability to challenge to the long tradition in Jewish women's culture, and other tales of brilliant women holding back on careers in case they outshone their husbands, and, sometimes, regretting it later. 'Life gives you lots of stories, lots of journeys, doesn't it?' one woman claimed.<sup>28</sup>

26 Janet Zollinger Giele, 'Women's role change and adaptation, 1920–1990' in Kathleen Hulbert and Diane Schuster (eds), *Women's lives through time: educated women of the twentieth century*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1993, pp. 32–60.

27 Grace K. Baruch; Rosalind C. Barnett, 'Women in the middle years, 1979–1980', 1982, Murray Research Archive.

28 Respondent to survey, 'Graduating in the fifties' project, Alison Mackinnon, Australian Research Council funded research project, 1994. Respondents to this survey had attended either the University of Adelaide or the University of Melbourne.

This narrative enriches the history of women and the history of education. Can it also influence current debates? Do the lives of these women, their varied journeys, have something to offer us in the twenty-first century? Between young women graduating today and the women of the 1950s and 60s stands the women's liberation movement, a movement shaped by many of that generation as we shall see. The women's movement opposed much of the zeitgeist of the earlier period: the restriction of women's futures to marriage and motherhood, the depiction of women as sexual objects. They fought for the opening of educational pathways, of careers and salary scales to women and men alike, for the reconstitution of marriage to incorporate the household labour of both women and men and much besides. Feminists of the 1970s and 80s envisaged a different future for women. It was to be one with equal educational outcomes and shared goals, not a future where educated women attempted to ape the patterns of men's lives. In the 1970s women spoke of part-time work, of shared careers and a right to leisure for both men and women, goals that seem to have disappeared in the greedy workplaces of the twenty-first century.

Can today's young women – attempting to combine careers, motherhood and a femininity that demands perfection in appearance and performance – learn from the women of the fifties? Certainly their expectations are high – a legacy of the women's liberation movement. They frequently outnumber and outperform men in schools and universities. They expect to enter careers and professions as men do. They expect their abilities to be seen for what they are, not a reflection of their appearance. They expect, and here is the crunch, that marriage, career and children can be combined in equal parts. In effect they expect to have it all. And why not? Yet, too often, when the children arrive reality hits and young women realize the cards are stacked against them as they juggle maternity, child care and career stresses.

This book reveals that there is much to learn from the women of the 1950s and 60s, the precursors of the women's liberation movement. As times become more conservative in much of the English-speaking world and the contradictions mount, today's young women need to look back as well as forward. They might recognize in the past

the pitfalls of accepting demands for impossible versions of femininity. They may need another revolution, another turn of the social clock, perhaps another 1965.



# 1 Who was she? Surveying the educated woman: posture photos, beauty queens, dormitory rules and achievement motivation

It certainly would be healthy to take the American College Woman off the point of a pin and out from under the microscope, where she has been now for years on end.<sup>1</sup>

I was looking at myself through the lens of history.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1950s and early 1960s women were frequently the object of the professional, the disciplinary and the prurient gaze. Educated women in particular were a matter of considerable anxiety and concern. Could they be well educated and still be trusted to take their places as dutiful wives and mothers? What did this surveillance mean for women? How could they become the subject of the gaze: looking at themselves and others? For some, higher education led to a transformation, an ability to see themselves in history<sup>3</sup> and in literature.<sup>4</sup> In this process of becoming a subject, rather than an object, women were transformed by, and began to transform, the educational experiences on offer.

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As Jill Ker's plane left Sydney for the United States in 1960 she left behind 'a culture hostile to aspiring women'. She was beset by 'the overwhelming anxiety induced by the social attitudes of the 1950s, at being a young women travelling about the world bent on her own in-

1 Nancy D. Lewis, 'College women and their proper spheres', *Journal of the American Association of University Women*, 47(4), 1954, p. 207.

2 Conway, *True north*, p. 56.

3 Jill Ker Conway, *The road from Coorain*, Vintage Books, New York, 1990.

4 Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a woman's life*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1988; Kate Millett, *Sexual politics*, Doubleday, Garden City, NY, 1970.

dividual purposes'.<sup>5</sup> Ker felt she was leaving behind the expectation that would signal to the world that 'a young female belonged with somebody else ... that she was going about her business of being a helpful and charming female bent on caring for the needs of others'. But could she leave those expectations behind? Were they peculiarly Australian?

At Radcliffe Graduate Centre at Harvard Jill Ker soon felt that she had come to live in 'one of the world's greatest concentrations of intellectual women'.<sup>6</sup> Her intellectual concerns were real, not defined as eccentricity as in Australia.<sup>7</sup> Not only the women's excitement at undertaking study but the articulateness of the men in her cohort delighted her as she realized that she had lived her 'entire life without really *talking* to people'.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps this was the promised land.

Yet even as she came to love the heady atmosphere of Cambridge and Harvard, Ker was puzzled by the attitudes to sex and dating. Women felt that they belonged in couples. They were even ashamed to be without a 'date' on a Saturday night, hiding in their rooms. Worse, Ker complained, 'not to want to be paired off in this ludicrous manner meant that one was "poorly adjusted", having trouble with one's feminine nature and headed for deep psychological trouble'.<sup>9</sup> Her request for migraine medication was received with a 'knowing look, which conveyed that I was riddled with neurosis, and that what ailed my head would disappear if only I found a man'.<sup>10</sup> Was the peer culture that distorted so many women's lives insidiously present at even the most respected centres of intellectual culture? Jill Ker was not immune to feminine distractions, or the need to project an attractive appearance. After agonizing about her forthcoming General Examination, the essential hurdle before undertaking research for a thesis

5 Conway, *True north*, p. x.

6 p. 9.

7 p. 23.

8 p. 17, original emphasis.

9 p. 21.

10 p. 22.

at Harvard, she spent the day before the exam ‘getting a massage and a facial at Elizabeth Arden and dining with friends’.<sup>11</sup>

By travelling across the Pacific Jill Ker had been transformed from a ‘university graduate’ in Australian parlance to a ‘college woman’. And both were a matter of considerable interest in her country of origin and the newly adopted one she embraced with such joy.

As Dean Nancy Lewis of Pembroke College noted: ‘it certainly would be healthy to take the American College Woman off the point of a pin and out from under the microscope, where she has been now for years on end’.<sup>12</sup> But had Jill Ker entirely escaped a culture hostile to aspiring women? Could she avoid the feeling of belonging to somebody else? The need to escape, to find a self, was an enduring motif of the 1950s and 60s when social science and psychology, politics and advertising conspired to convince women of their inevitable futures. They were to be wives and mothers, consorts of men. Educated maybe, fascinating dinner companions maybe, as well as sexual partners, but partners nevertheless. These college women excited considerable comment.

In a 1954 address Dean Nancy Lewis cleverly satirized the continuing interest in ‘the college woman’. How, she asked, ‘has the college man escaped and why has no one written a critical analysis of *his* shortcomings so that his college could see and mend the error of its ways?’<sup>13</sup> Lewis went on to do precisely that, suggesting some cunning reversals: ‘Educating your son in the interests of our daughter’ or ‘Trends in the higher education of men and what this portends for the post-graduation activities of women’.<sup>14</sup> Joan Scott noted that continuing concern in 1985: ‘There is [in the literature about higher education for women] a persistent and striking undercurrent of concern with sex and gender, with the impact education will have on the sexuality of women and on that system of gender relations deemed “natural” to human society’.<sup>15</sup>

11 p. 35.

12 Lewis, ‘College women and their proper spheres’, p. 207.

13 p. 208.

14 p. 207.

15 Quoted in Carolyn Heilbrun, *Hamlet's mother and other women*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002, p. 220.

It was not only the American ‘college’ woman who occupied that uncomfortable position. Since women entered higher education in the nineteenth century they have been the subject of anxious social commentators. From Herbert Spencer’s well-documented fears that study would ‘desex’ women, causing blood to flow from their wombs to their brains and hence limit their child-bearing potential, to later concerns that educated women might be *disinclined* to marry and produce children, educators, medical experts, social scientists and psychologists have wanted to understand that disturbing being – the educated woman.

Women too have joined the fray, frequently with the desire to rebut some of the stranger theories of their detractors. In 1880s England Eleanor Sidgwick undertook a lengthy study of Newnham College graduates in an attempt to show that they had not been ruined for marriage and child bearing compared with their less educated relatives.<sup>16</sup> It has not only been in defence of women’s education that women have surveyed their peers. They too have wanted to know what difference education made to the lives of women who sought it. The International Federation for University Women and its national affiliates have skilfully used the instrument of the survey to argue for a better deal for women in employment and the professions.

In this chapter we look at a range of surveys, studies and other measures that focused on the lives of women graduates of the 1950s and early 60s in both Australia and the United States. Some looked briefly at women at a particular point in time. Other life course studies enable us to track the lives of women over several decades. Underlying them all is a distinct anxiety about the educated woman. Who is she? Can she really be trusted not to undermine life as we know it? If we categorize her can we perhaps tame her, make her more amenable? In this climate it is hardly surprising that the young Jill Ker was unsure of her sense of herself as an intelligent person.

Women graduates have been the subjects of massive observation. The Henry A. Murray Research Center Data Archive at the Radcliffe

16 Alison Mackinnon, *Love and freedom: professional women and the reshaping of personal life*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1997.

Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard, for example, lists at least seventy studies, several of them longitudinal, that dissect and analyze the educated woman from all possible angles. This is not surprising: the Murray Center is after all the Center for the Study of Lives. But what is truly astonishing is the range of studies. We can assess a woman's achievement motivation; her goals, attitudes and values; the role conflict she experiences; her fear of success; her likelihood of suffering from bulimia; and her ideas of identity and intimacy in marriage. We can begin to understand her likelihood of studying engineering, joining the women's liberation movement or volunteering; her ability to cope with children and a career, with ageing or with occupational stress. She has been truly put under the microscope.

While many of these studies cluster around the period of the 1970s and 80s – a period when women researchers were trying to understand themselves better – many started earlier and followed women through the stormy period of the changes of the 1960s and 1970s, thus producing a valuable picture of 'lives over time'.<sup>17</sup> Many come from a narrowly psychological approach; others are sociological. All reflect their time and the preoccupations of their practitioners. Sometimes the questions asked are as revealing as the responses. Some studies not specifically aimed at college women nevertheless offer a window into understanding graduates' way of life, as it is possible to select highly educated women from the larger group. The wonderful Kelly Longitudinal Study, for example, used extensively by Elaine Tyler May for her book *Homeward bound*,<sup>18</sup> looks at marital compatibility. For researchers who seek to understand the marriages of educated women in the fifties this is an insightful, and often baffling, resource on the level of acceptance of marital limitations by women that is hard to understand today.

17 Kathleen Day Hulbert, 'Reflections on the lives of educated women' in Hulbert and Schuster, *Women's lives through time*.

18 Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward bound: American families in the Cold War era*, Basic Books, New York, 1988.

## Measuring up: the sexual gaze

Not only were women subjected to the metaphorical gaze of the social researcher. They had to measure up under the direct gaze of many others, usually male. The direct gaze stretched from the posture photos taken by a generation of researchers, supposedly to support scientific and anthropological understanding, to the multitude of university and college beauty contests that characterized the fifties and early sixties. Both subjected women's bodies to critical observation, teaching them the hard lessons of what constituted the ideal feminine shape.

### *Posture photos*

An extraordinary ritual of the period from the 1930s to the 1960s was the taking of nude posture photographs of new students on campus, particularly at the more elite US institutions for both men and women. Radcliffe, Ron Rosenbaum claims, took posture photos from 1931 to 1961, Wellesley from the 1920s.<sup>19</sup> Male and female students were photographed nude, full length, front, back and side. These photographs were originally intended to highlight postural defects, leading to remedial exercises. At least that is the official story ... Rosenbaum, a *New York Times* writer, following leads in the 1990s, claimed that the photos were actually made for anthropological research, stemming from Francis Galton, the British founder of social Darwinism. The practice was taken over in the 1940s and 50s by anthropologists E.A. Hooton and W.H. Sheldon. Sheldon in particular was obsessed with body types (somatypes) and was the originator of the well-known endomorph, ectomorph and mesomorph typology, which purported to predict personality from body type, to predict, for instance, who was predisposed to criminality or leadership. George Hersey, interviewed

19 Ron Rosenbaum, 'The great Ivy League nude posture photo scandal', *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, 15 January 1995.

for a 1995 article on Sheldon, claimed that it was believed at the time ‘that a person’s body, measured and analysed, could tell much about intelligence, temperament, moral worth and probable future achievement’.<sup>20</sup> Sheldon also wrote the well-known *Atlas of men*, illustrated with Harvard nudes.

Was there a sinister motive behind the posture photos? Hersey claimed a eugenic purpose for the practice and cited Hooton as proposing that the data would eventually lead to proposals ‘to control and limit the production of inferior and useless organisms’.<sup>21</sup> The idea was to encourage better breeding – getting the male and female students of the elite colleges together – an idea that was certainly in the minds of many students and parents if not for such eugenic and indeed racist purposes.

It is not my intention to get to the bottom of this fascinating story here, although the defeat of Sheldon’s attempt to put together an *Atlas of women* would make a tempting detour. Many women’s colleges were keen to distance themselves from any such motives.<sup>22</sup> At Smith College posture pictures continued to be taken until 1973. Alison Prentice wrote to her parents:

I never did tell you what I got in my posture picture – I’m almost a genius. It was C+. However I have an increased pelvic tilt, my shoulders are too far back and my head too far forward. ie [picture] – something like this! We are having our pictures taken again next Monday – and so I will let you know if there is any gigantic improvement. It’s terribly humiliating and above all downright discouraging to discover that as a physical specimen you are a complete wreck! A shame to the human race.<sup>23</sup>

A later study found that posture was not a strong predictor for future neck or back pains, suggesting that the intent was medical rather than

20 Hersey, quoted in Rosenbaum, p. 30.

21 Hersey, quoted in Rosenbaum, p. 30. See also George L. Hersey, *The evolution of allure: sexual selection from the Medici Venus to the Incredible Hulk*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1996.

22 See for instance, Sarah Ligon, ‘A crooked science: the history of posture photos at Wellesley’, *Counterpoint: the MIT-Wellesley Journal of Campus Life*, February 2002, pp. 12–15.

23 Prentice letters, private collection, 8 November 1951.

anthropological.<sup>24</sup> What is significant is the impact of such practices – nude photos often taken by male photographers, albeit in white lab coats – on the psyches of the women students who lined up for them. *The Radcliffe News* of 1949 wrote flippantly of new students: ‘their egos were deflated at the sight of their cotton-robed selves awaiting posture pictures’.<sup>25</sup>

Sylvia Plath fictionalized the ritual in *The bell jar*:

[it] appealed to me about as much as having my posture picture taken at college, where you have to stand naked in front of a camera, knowing all the time that a picture of you stark naked, both full view and side view, is going into the college gym files to be marked ABC or D depending on how straight you are.<sup>26</sup>

To her mother, as always, she wrote a more sanitized and cheerful version:

my physical exam ... consisted in getting swathed in a sheet and passing from one room to another in nudity. I'm so used to hearing, 'Drop your sheet', that I have to watch myself now lest I forget to dress! My height is an even 5'9", my weight 137; my posture good; although when my posture picture was taken, I took such pains to get my heels and ears in a straight line that I forgot to tilt up straight. The result was the comment, 'You have good alignment, but you are in constant danger of falling on your face'.<sup>27</sup>

But there were more serious claims than deflated egos. In 1995 Ron Rosenbaum tracked down remaining photos, and Sheldon's files, then located in the National Anthropological Archives within the National Museum of Natural History in Washington.<sup>28</sup> There he found *inter alia* proof that for women the experience could indeed be disturbing. A reply to a letter of Sheldon's asking to rephotograph the female freshmen

24 Smith College, Class of 1957 25th Reunion Book, 1982.

25 *The Radcliffe News*, September 1949.

26 Sylvia Plath, quoted in Jane Yolen, 'Posture picture on the wall, who's the straightest of us all?', *Smith Alumnae Quarterly*, Fall 1984, p. 19.

27 Aurelia Schober Plath (ed.), *Letters home by Sylvia Plath*, Faber and Faber, London, 1975, p. 48.

28 Rosenbaum, 'The great Ivy League nude posture photo scandal', p. 46.

at Denison University, Ohio, for technical reasons, was revealing. Sheldon's request was refused on the grounds that 'to require them to pose for another [nude posture photo] would create insurmountable psychological problems'.<sup>29</sup> The faces told a similar story. Rosenbaum found the faces of the men in the photos 'diffident', 'oblivious'. But the women, he claimed, 'were another story'. He was surprised at how many 'looked deeply unhappy': he detected 'what looked like grimaces, reflecting pronounced discomfort, perhaps even anger'.<sup>30</sup>

Did this practice take off elsewhere at the time? My high school class was examined semi-nude in the late '50s by a doctor who asked jovially if I were a horse rider, a reference to my bandy legs. The legacy of this remark, probably well-intentioned and meant to set a young woman at ease, was a recurring anxiety about the shape of my legs. But I have not yet found evidence of posture photographs in Australia.

### *Beauty contests*

Being in front of the camera was not always an unhappy experience for women. One large state campus in the United States offered a sample of the wide array of contests through which a US co-ed (that is, a woman who attended a co-educational institution) could achieve acclaim from her peers. She could become a University of Texas Sweetheart, the highest accolade, or at least a finalist in that competition. She might become a Bluebonnet Belle (there were ten belles so the chances were considerably enhanced) or even a Bluebonnet Belle nominee. All sweethearts, runners up, belles and nominees were photographed, frequently in full-page photo spreads, or, in the case of nominees, listed in the *Cactus*, the annual University of Texas at Austin yearbook. She might also be chosen as one of the student 'literary' magazine, the *Texas Ranger's*, monthly pin-ups where a two-page spread would feature prominently the girl of choice, preferably in

29 p. 56.

30 p. 56. See also Yolen, 'Posture picture on the wall'.

shorts with as much leg displayed as possible. Several other smaller, less prestigious possibilities existed, giving many young co-eds the opportunity to include these awards in their CV. In the frequent wedding announcements listed in *The Daily Texan*, the student newspaper, a girl's awards were always noted with great acclaim, even providing headline material. 'Texas Sweetheart weds' was not atypical. Even in the Law School, not a common destination for women students at the time, a U of T young woman could vie to become a Portia. *The Dicta*, 'the voice of the Law Students' noted in 1958 that this annual event is sponsored by *Perigrinus* as a recognition of the girls in the Law School. They were chosen on their scholarship, personality, beauty and extra-curricular activities.<sup>31</sup>

One law graduate of the class of '51 recalls that the few women in law school were exploited by today's standards.

The Portia contest developed during my time. That was the election for the law school Sweetheart. If you were female, you were automatically entered in the contest, and your name went on the ballot to be voted on by the whole school. One year, all women in school were called to the office. We were posed for a photograph, sitting on the counter with legs crossed in cheesecake style. When one brave soul voiced the discomfort many of us felt at this stunt, she was characterized as a 'bad sport'.<sup>32</sup>

This law graduate went on to become the first woman from Texas and the youngest lawyer ever to argue a case before the United States Supreme Court.<sup>33</sup> No doubt the experience bred a strong sense of self, of needing to 'sink or swim', as an earlier graduate noted.<sup>34</sup> At Louisiana State University Beauties, Favorites and Darlings were chosen by male ballot. The LSU *Gumbo* regularly reported the voting and the winners of the Darling of LSU.

31 *The Dicta*, vol. 57, 4 March 1958.

32 Tarpley, quoted in Marquette Maresh, 'Our place in history: a celebration of women in the law at the University of Texas School of Law 1999 reception remarks', *Texas Journal of Women and the Law*, 8(2), 1999, pp. 340–341.

33 p. 361.

34 p. 337.

It is strange that the beauty queen culture became so rampant in colleges and universities. It was pervasive in American high schools of the time but was usually inaccessible to ‘clever’ girls. In high school, Lois Banner claims, beauty and popularity were incompatible with ‘brains’ or athletic success for girls. ‘Brains like Fran [Banner’s soul mate] and me could never win such titles’, she reported. They would not have their outfits exhibited in the school front hall display case as ‘winner of the monthly competition for the best groomed girl-of-the-month’, Banner explains: ‘brains cancelled out whatever beauty I possessed’.<sup>35</sup> Clearly this cancellation no longer operated in colleges and universities where even stronger measures were necessary to assure the anxious population that educated girls were being produced for their ultimate roles as wives, mothers and consumers.

On the west coast of the United States, University of California at Berkeley girls did not feature quite as prominently in full-page spreads in the annual yearbook but could nevertheless vie for the titles of Homecoming Queen, Dream Girl of Delta Sigma Phi, Daffodil Queen and Ski Queen. They could even be a ‘Lux Lovely’. But the Berkeley co-eds roped in their male counterparts to at least a small degree. There was an annual ‘Ugly Man’ contest (photos do not seem to bear out the aptness of the title) and at a fashion event ‘Bud Sweet was crowned Dude of the Day by these fair co-eds’, as the caption put it.<sup>36</sup>

Australian universities also had their beauty queens although there was a far smaller set of awards to vie for. The University of Adelaide Miss University contest of 1950, ostensibly a fundraising event, was reported in the student journal *On Dit*. The basis of judging was ‘*General Attractiveness*, which includes (1) figure, (2) posture, (3) features, (4) clothes sense – individuality, smartness etc. Secondly, *Personality*, which includes (1) general intellect, (2) voice, (3) mannerisms and (4) social sense.’<sup>37</sup> At Melbourne University in the late 1950s and early 60s Miss Fresher contests still attracted keen interest.

35 Banner, *Finding Fran*, p. 64.

36 *Blue and Gold*, Associated Students of the University of California at Berkeley (ASUC), 1952, p. 97.

37 *On Dit*, 19 June 1950, p. 3.

The tone of *On Dit* made it clear that women's appearance was paramount and a sexual sub-text was common in reporting women's activities. Reporting of student balls and dances in the local Adelaide newspapers focused more on fashion than on sex: 'Frocking, colourful and delightfully individual, allied with the gaily attractive flower groupings, made a picture of collective beauty' gushed a report of the St Ann's College dance of 1951.<sup>38</sup> Individual outfits were described enthusiastically: the 'silvery grey tulle and satin dress' of the vice president of the College Club received the full treatment. 'Vertical tucks fashioned the little strapless bodice banded in satin, and fullness to the skirt was draped from one side. A cloud of tulle was added for [a] stole.'<sup>39</sup> Student publications, however, were less concerned with the niceties of fashion.

If Australian student publications lacked the same obvious enthusiasm for women competing through their looks they made up for it in their level of reporting, often salacious and misogynist. A report of the Women's Union annual revue in 1953 declared that

Despite the fears of certain old-fashioned girls who had heard 'that the Women's Union Revue is not quite nice', Lorna Seedsman, Marie Guinand, Jenny Samuel, Julianne Gunnin and a host of other luscious and leggy lovelies will be let loose towards the end of July in an extravaganza of music, mirth and mysticism.<sup>40</sup>

The caption of the photos of two women from the previous year's revue was: 'Talk about cheesecake. 202 pounds of fun in a highlight from last year's Women's Revue.' A report about rehearsals stated: 'day by day the high kicks get higher and the low jokes get lower'.<sup>41</sup>

There was a distinct sexual innuendo in these reports, less common in the US student journals. The impact of the innuendo in Australian student journals was magnified by the sheer barrage of misogynist remarks and relentless emphasis on women's sex. In the mid 1950s *On Dit* contained a regular column on current affairs called 'A-Breast

38 Payne, *St Ann's College*, p. 32.

39 p. 32.

40 *On Dit*, 1 July 1953, p. 3.

41 *ibid.*

of the Times' which featured a gratuitous picture of a woman showing plenty of cleavage or a large-breasted film star in profile (the word 'gratuitous' was suggested here by my young female research assistant whose twenty-first century feminist values were affronted by such blatant reporting). A mammary fixation seems to have been a particular obsession for the student editors at the time. In May 1950 a debate between men students was held on the topic 'That this house prefers Bertrand to Jane' (referring to Bertrand and Jane Russell). The *On Dit* report, as well as the actual debate, contained many comments about Jane Russell's breasts. This same concern almost crushed the high spirits of one female law student: 'There was an incident I think almost in my first year where there was a law school paper ... and someone wrote about me and my bouncy breasts, and that was just enough to make you self-conscious and to dampen what otherwise would be a very natural outgoing sort of thing. But it didn't dampen me totally.'<sup>42</sup>

## The disciplinary gaze

Women students who lived in residential colleges or dormitories in both Australia and the United States were subject to a set of rigid rules that shaped their comings and goings and, in particular, any activities with the opposite sex. The rules encompassed dress, curfews and forms of appropriate behaviour. It was hard work policing the moral boundaries, as the US Intercollegiate Associated Women Students (IAWS) acknowledged in 1954. 'Since every community looks to college women for leadership', they noted, 'AWS should be concerned with training them in their campus life'. Yet there was a common problem: 'how could moral values be upheld when there is a considerable time lag between the time when entertainment facilities close and

42 Interview, 'Graduating in the Fifties' project, Melbourne.

the hours the girls are required to be in'.<sup>43</sup> 'No alcohol' and 'no men' were two important rules at St Ann's College in Adelaide, South Australia.<sup>44</sup> Clearly the mix of alcohol, men and unsupervised hours was inflammatory in an age where unmarried pregnancy was the most feared outcome for women and college authorities alike.

Those who infringed the rules might come before a Judicial Committee of their peers. The committee had the power to impose sanctions such as 'grounding' or being 'gated' (being confined to the residence), or being 'campused' (confined to the college and the library). Curiously these rules, while part of the wider university's *in loco parentis* role, often overseen by a Dean of Women, were administered by the students themselves, who operated as responsible governing and judicial officers. Women's rules stood for self-government. Thus while they constituted a set of behavioural restrictions on the one hand, their administration provided a training ground for young women in a range of leadership and committee activities on the other. Women learned how to police other women. The papers of the Judicial Committee of one particular Women's Dormitory Association (WDA) provide, over a number of years, an insight into a process of social change as the fine distinction of rules and sanctions for infringement of rules that obtained in the early 1950s gave way to an increasing sense of irrelevance and, eventually, restructuring by 1966.

The University of California (Berkeley) Women's Dormitory Association (WDA) was formed in 1915 and aimed to 'encourage the development in each house of a high standard of scholarship, conduct and participation in living group and campus activities'.<sup>45</sup> Records kept in the early 1950s include rules of personal conduct such as these:

43 IAWS, regional convention reports, manual on leadership program and life after college, 1954, in Women's Dormitory Association Records, Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, p. 16.

44 Payne, *St Ann's College*, p. 26.

45 WDA records, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

1. Housecoats and slippers may be worn to breakfast and in the downstairs rooms until 10am only.
2. Slacks and jeans may be worn to breakfast and lunch only; campus clothes may be worn to dinner.
3. Bandanas may never be worn to Sunday dinner. Bandanas may be worn at all other meals if tied neatly.
4. Shorts must never be worn in the living room, drawing room, sitting room etc. or dining room.

Smoking had its own set of rules:

1. Smoking on campus shall be allowed only in accepted places (ie Wheeler steps, Library steps, in classrooms with the approval of the instructor).
2. There shall be no smoking in the dining room except on special occasions when smoking is permitted.

The rules also noted menacingly that ‘No woman should be out alone after dusk’. The rules on ‘lockouts’ were one of the key issues the Women’s Judicial Committee (WJC) concerned itself with. The girl on duty was to close the downstairs door at 6 pm, the time the girls were to be back in the residence. A girl could be ‘campused’ for two nights if she forgot to do the lockout. Exceptions were made for those with specials (permissions) and on weekends. The WJC constantly worried about the problem of ‘apathy’: girls who did not want to go to residence/dormitory meetings.

The involvement of students in the judicial and other committees that administered the rules was deliberate: it trained them in leadership opportunities. They learned meeting procedures, to engender sociability, etiquette and the place of service activities. The annual report of the Dean of Women at the University of Texas, Austin, mentioned with concern a survey that showed that ‘all major offices for women were held by just a handful of students’.<sup>46</sup> This resulted in an attempt

46 Dean of Women at the University of Texas at Austin, *Annual Report 1953–54*, Centre for American History, University of Texas Archives.

to distribute opportunities for leadership and responsibility more widely. Beth Bailey argues that throughout the 1950s the system of controls became increasingly complex: 'by the early 1960s it was so elaborate as to be ludicrous'.<sup>47</sup> She gives the University of Michigan as an example: nine of the student handbook's fifteen pages were devoted to the details of women's hours and curfew regulations. Bailey argues that in fact 'the overelaboration of rules is in itself evidence that the controls were beleaguered'.<sup>48</sup>

There were many who sought to transgress the rules. Elaborate stratagems were devised to escape detection if a student with a late pass returned after the deadline. At St Ann's students were required to place their keys into a box, the resounding thud assuring the listening authorities of their return. Latecomers devised strategies such as flushing the toilet at the same time to muffle the sound, or lowering the key on a strand of hair or, in time-honoured fashion, climbing in through windows left open by friends.<sup>49</sup> In Texas the Dean of Student Life reported in October 1954 that 'girls are objecting to petty rules regarding dress, blue jeans, etc.' and further in 1955 that there was concern over students moving out to apartments.<sup>50</sup> By 1959 the Dean was considering limited joint activities between the men and the women. She 'suggested a letter should be written to Indiana University to see how their dormitory with one wing for men and one for women and joint eating in the centre is working out'.<sup>51</sup> The University of California (Berkeley) Women's Dormitory Association constantly complained of apathy amongst students, of girls not attending meetings, resisting attempts to engender 'house unity' and 'spirit'.

The dormitory association papers at the University of Texas at Austin offer another perspective – on racial segregation. It was noted

47 Beth Bailey, *Sex in the heartland*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1999, p. 79.

48 p. 80.

49 Payne, *St Ann's College*, p. 25.

50 University of Texas at Austin, Dean of Women's reports, summary of disciplinary cases, University of Texas Archives.

51 Dean of Women, UT-A, staff meeting minutes, 27 October 1959.

that ‘During a wing meeting in Kinsolving [the women’s dormitory] in October, 1961, upper-class advisers told residents that it was unadvisable to invite them (female negro [sic] guests) up, and we will discourage it’.<sup>52</sup> The co-eds at the meeting applauded. It was not until 1972 that *The Daily Texan* headlined the news of ‘UT dorms integrated after long struggle’.<sup>53</sup> This contrasts with the more liberal UC (Berkeley) where a Co-operative Association booklet of 1961–62 noted ‘their cosmopolitan atmosphere and inter-racial interdenominational traditions’.<sup>54</sup>

For those elite American women who lived in sorority houses a different form of disciplining was occurring, a shaping of the ideal wife for the new professional, a subtle containment of any nascent academic ambitions. The sharpest, sometimes satirical, portraits of the era come from women writers. Joan Didion, alumna (class of 1956) of the University of California at Berkeley, wrote an account of Berkeley in the up-market magazine *Mademoiselle* in 1960. Describing women students who are ‘affiliated’ she wrote:

in a house a girl observes all the amenities of life at home. She reads or plays bridge until dinner, against a comforting counterpoint of soft voices, muffled telephones and someone picking out an everlasting Autumn in New York on the piano. After dinner the housemother pours coffee in the living room from a silver urn, pledges drift off to their compulsory three-hour study period and upperclassmen [sic] settle down to study or knit or watch television and to wait for the telephone ...

‘I wish we could go somewhere besides fraternity parties’, a pretty girl tells you wistfully, and another, a transfer from a smaller Californian college, adds: ‘I used to go out with boys I wouldn’t dream of marrying. Sometimes now I miss that.’ She sounds as if she were expressing a desire to see the far side of the moon, and she is, in her terms, doing just that. Her entire *modus vivendi* is oriented towards the day when she will be called upon to pour coffee in her own living room.<sup>55</sup>

52 UT-A, Almetris Papers.

53 *Daily Texan*, 5 May 1972.

54 In WDA records.

55 Joan Didion, ‘Berkeley’s giant: the University of California’, *Mademoiselle*, January 1960, quoted in Ray Colvig, ‘Few concerns, fewer women’, *Chronicle of the University of California*, 1(2), 1998, p. 113.

Joyce Carol Oates went further in her bitter fictional portrait of the Kappa Gamma Pi house at Syracuse where ‘a half-dozen girls blithely ignored the ledger book, and, yet more defiantly, trailed in after 11.00 pm curfew, delivered giggling and swaying-drunk to the doors by their dates’.<sup>56</sup>

Sororities warrant a book on their own but it is worth noting here that even in 1965, our year when the axis tilted, UC sociology professor John Finlay Scott observed that the college sorority was one of the principal instruments created by the American middle class to make sure its daughters married the right man.<sup>57</sup> Sororities were carefully ranked for social class and some evaded the worst of the marriage mills. Lois Banner wrote of UCLA that her sorority sisters ‘actually respected scholastic achievement and esteemed me for my good grades’.<sup>58</sup>

By the mid 1960s in a climate of increasing questioning the strain of maintaining the rules was just too great. At university campuses throughout the US and Australia the rules gave way to a sense of women being responsible for their own behaviour, an acceptance that the double standard was outdated. An Associated Women Students (AWS) meeting was called in 1963 to discuss the rules concerning lockout – ‘not from a standpoint of how they are enforced or carried out – but rather from the more philosophical side relating to why we have them at all’.<sup>59</sup> The UC (Berkeley) yearbook of 1965 was dedicated to the United Nations and focused on student protest and free speech. At Berkeley in 1966 the WDA formed a restructuring committee with a proposal for an independent social organization. Membership was to be open to men’s houses and co-ed houses. It was the end of the Women’s Dormitory Association as such.<sup>60</sup> The restructuring committee proposed the dissolution of the association, the scholarship funds to be distributed to girls in approved ‘non-sorority houses’.

It was the end of an era, the beginning of a more open and sexually liberated climate at universities and colleges.

56 Joyce Carol Oates, *I’ll take you there*, Fourth Estate, London, 2003, p. 15.

57 ‘Sororities like marriage mills, sociologist says’, *LA Times*, 10 May 1965.

58 Banner, *Finding Fran*, p. 112.

59 AWS records, 8 May 1963, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

60 WDA records, University of California, Berkeley.

## The social science gaze

### *The will to achieve*

Although the ambitions of senior women at Berkeley seemed serious did women have the same will to achieve as men? This hot topic has flourished in the research literature on women's education. In some ways it is an element of Freud's famous question 'what do women want?' In another it harks back to the nineteenth century concern about the 'divided aim' that vitiated women's drive: were women to be educated for motherhood or for a career? The question has animated educators since women's appearance on the educational stage, as it is feared that an investment in women's higher education, without a guarantee of her commitment to achievement, would be an investment wasted. Of course a woman's will to achieve could always be sidetracked by other concerns: her need to attend to family matters, her fear of appearing 'unfeminine', or most tellingly the 'role conflict' she suffered. The tendency to see such traits as independent of circumstances is typical of the narrow psychological approach of many studies of highly educated women. We are brought back to the realities of 'achievement motivation' by a statement from a Sydney graduate study: 'mothers of pre-school children found their aims more difficult to achieve than the working women generally'.<sup>61</sup>

Also hidden in many women's subconscious was the infamous 'motive to avoid success', a problem that did not seem to afflict Jill Ker. Matina Horner's work sums up much of the anxiety around educating women in the mid 1960s. Horner and others identified a trait within some women that made them anxious about success. The anxiety was based on the idea that femininity and individual achievement, particularly feats that reflected intellectual competence or leadership

61 Madge Dawson, *Graduate and married: a report on a survey of one thousand and seventy married women graduates of the University of Sydney*, University of Sydney, Sydney, 1965, p. 181.

potential, were mutually exclusive.<sup>62</sup> This idea in itself drew on Freudian psychology, particularly on the idea that the essence of femininity was the repression of aggressiveness. Thus the qualities necessary for intellectual success, competition, independence and competence, which were highly valued in men, cast doubts upon a woman's femininity. Indeed they might lead to feared accusations of masculinity in women. Horner quoted Margaret Mead: 'Each step forward as a successful American regardless of sex means a step backward as a woman'.<sup>63</sup>

How pervasive was this 'fear of success' or, as Horner recast it, the 'motive to avoid success'? Horner found it to be prevalent among girls from predominantly middle and upper class homes, and those whose male peers did not value educated or career women. It occurred even in select women's colleges and became more marked over the course of their studies. Basing her studies at the University of Michigan, a large public 'multiversity', Horner lamented the fact that in spite of the increasing freedoms for women from the mid 1960s the motive to avoid success was growing. Femininity and competitive achievement continued to be desirable but mutually exclusive. She suggested that young women who faced this conflict would adjust their expectations and behaviours, disguise their abilities and move away from competition. This however, came at a price: internalized feelings of frustration, bitterness and confusion.<sup>64</sup> Here surely was a variant of Friedan's 'problem that has no name'.

But for some the script could work in reverse. The motive to achieve could be activated by class as much as by personality, by attempts to heal the 'hidden injuries of class', to live out the unachieved ambition of deeply imprinted family scripts. Lois Banner, writing of her background as a daughter of farmers and workers with strong ethnic ties, recognized later in life her family legacy: 'The drive to achievement was my birthright, handed to me by a family whose

62 Matina Horner, 'Towards an understanding of achievement-related conflicts in women', *Journal of Social Issues*, 28(2), 1972, p. 157.

63 p. 158.

64 p. 171.

members for several generations had fallen short of the mark'.<sup>65</sup> 'Behind my lust for education', she wrote of her UCLA degree, 'lay the drive to improve my social status even though it was hidden from my external self'.<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, Banner felt that her friend Fran, who had a patrician heritage, could reject high achievement because 'her personal lexicon, her family history, already included it'.<sup>67</sup> This analysis, based on class, seems more satisfying than seeking an elusive trait of personality.

*Role conflict: could married women work without destroying the family?*

When the Homecoming Queens and Daffodil Girls left colleges and universities with their newly minted degrees they anticipated a life of marriage but not necessarily of paid work. Increasingly however paid work became part of their lives. So did the expected parenting and voluntary work. Could they handle those competing 'roles'? The notion of role conflict embodies the anxieties that surrounded the entry of highly educated women into careers. A study undertaken by Baruch and Barnett in 1979–80 set out to examine women's involvement in multiple roles in relation to three indices of psychological distress.<sup>68</sup> These indices were role overload, role conflict and anxiety. The researchers examined 'women in the middle years', women whose mean sample age was 43.6. These then were the women who had graduated from US universities in the 1950s and early 60s. Among the questions they were asked was 'Have you ever had a nervous breakdown?' – a question redolent of the period which solicited a surprising number of positive responses and was certainly seen as entirely appropriate.

The study yielded some unexpected results, including the fact that highly educated women were at particular risk: 'It may be that more

65 Banner, *Finding Fran*, p. 97.

66 p. 114.

67 p. 97.

68 Baruch and Barnett, 'Women in the middle years'.

highly-educated women in fact experience more conflict, perhaps because of more rigid standards they set as wives, or mothers, or perhaps because of greater demands at work'. The authors looked first for an explanation in their subjects' sense of responsibility: 'They may be more likely to report the conflict'.<sup>69</sup>

As well as educational achievement playing a greater part, motherhood seemed to cause particular problems. The authors wrote: 'role conflict increases with greater educational attainment: moreover, controlling for education, age, income and employment status mothers experience more role conflict than do childless women'. So far this might have been predicted. But the next sentence is unexpected. 'In contrast to widespread belief,' the authors wrote, 'the role of paid worker per se does not add significantly to role conflict'.<sup>70</sup> Thus 'the two most striking findings of the study are', Baruch and Barnett concluded, that 'the role of parent rather than that of paid worker is the major source of stress for women in the middle years' and 'the quality of the experience within a woman's social roles is a major independent predictor of role overload, role conflict and anxiety'. Finally, 'role overload and role conflict were associated with anxiety *only amongst the non-employed women*'.<sup>71</sup> Hence, they concluded, not surprisingly, 'it may be that employment mitigates the stressful effects of role overload and role conflict'.<sup>72</sup>

Here was a strange finding indeed: that employment might mitigate rather than worsen possible role conflict. The anxiety might also have been in the mind of the observers, anxious as to where the employed wives and mothers were heading. The psychological notion of role conflict was pervasive among the many varied studies of graduate women. In a study of Vassar women graduates of the class of 1957 and '58 Brown and Pacini found that '[m]ost of the Vassar women reported having experienced some conflict among their roles – mother, wife and worker – especially during the years when their chil-

69 p. 9.

70 p. 13.

71 My emphasis.

72 p. 18.

dren were very young'.<sup>73</sup> Role conflict was felt most acutely by the divorced women in their sample.

Summing up twelve studies that followed educated women into midlife and beyond Kathleen Hulbert argues that the majority, 'whatever paths they followed through adulthood, were found to have a strong sense of self and of their own competence and to have high levels of satisfaction with their lives'.<sup>74</sup> This suggests that 'role conflict', where it existed, had been dealt with in ways that allowed most educated women to feel it had been resolved or at least accommodated.

### *Interviews*

As revealing as the interviews themselves in Baruch and Barnett's study were the directions for the interviewers. On the last sheet of the questionnaire the following instructions appeared. The interviewers were to rate the respondent for her level of comprehension and cooperativeness.

#### **Interviewer: this section by observation**

1. Interviewer Judgment: comprehension rating
  - Fully comprehended questions
  - Did not fully comprehend questions
  - Unable to make judgement
2. R's cooperativeness toward the interview (R was, in general)
  - Cooperative, neutral, antagonistic.

The interviewer was also to observe and rate the respondent's physical appearance as:

73 Donald Brown and Rosemary Pacini, 'The Vassar classes of 1957 and 1958: the ideal student study' in Hulbert and Schuster, *Women's lives through time*, p. 180.

74 Hulbert, 'Reflections on the lives of educated women', p. 434.

- Strikingly beautiful
- Good looking above average for age and sex
- Average looks for age and sex
- Quite plain: below average for age and sex
- Homely

One interviewer took the first instruction very seriously, writing the following note:

The interview began at 9.30am. R said she needed a can of beer. She gave a story about being sick all week and friends had recommended drinking beer. R did not appear to have DTs but did appear to have difficulty comprehending questions in the initial section of the interview and not from lack of intelligence.

For appearance she wrote: 3 – ‘but a worn-out look’.

It seems that it was not just the masculine or anthropological gaze that had to be endured but that of the social science researcher – male or female. And, we might wonder, whose standards of beauty were paramount? The stories from this study trace a longitudinal picture of many women who graduated in the 1950s and 60s from a range of institutions, state and private, elite and otherwise. Happily, the questionnaire asked the respondents if they had been affected by the women’s movement. Three stories from this study’s detailed questionnaire reveal some of the workings of role conflict and role satisfaction as they were understood at the time.<sup>75</sup>

75 As well as avoiding names and places to ensure complete confidentiality I have occasionally scrambled details, for example altering a husband’s occupation to a related occupation.

## *Women's stories*

The first story illustrates a level of anxiety (role conflict).

### *Master of Science (library science), husband doctor, 3 children*

On a scale of 1–7 this respondent replied to the question ‘how satisfied [are you] with being at home rather than having a paid job’ between 5 and 6. The interviewer noted that she would like a part-time job and to be able to be involved in community activities around children. Her sexual relationship was rated ‘not as good as I might like’. She rated herself an average mother.

On her expectation of her husband’s support she said ‘It was one of those things always assumed like going to college. This was the dream of the 50s. [Now] I feel economically very dependent.’ She wrote of having limited freedom and options. ‘Makes me feel annoyed with myself over lack of initiative, courage, daring’. Her husband felt much less threatened by their finances because he had control over a large amount of money. The wife was asked about her expectations when she was growing up: ‘I cringe to think. Expected to go to college, to work, to marry, to travel, to have children. My expectations virtually stopped there. I don’t think it’s all that uncommon. I would be a housewife and mother.’ She reported problems with depression.

[Int.: if you could change one thing?] I would have a career. I would – with perfect hindsight. I would have prepared in college for something I could do professionally, on a part-time basis rather than a series of interesting jobs without a common goal. [Turning points?] Marriage? My life became centred in a different way. I automatically thought I was supposed to put other people first and systematically – it sounds too strong but can’t think of less strong words – put myself in a secondary position. In effect that’s what happened. [Overall?] Not too happy. What I’m going to become involved in. How I’m going to spend my time. What I’m going to become committed to ... Striking the balance between home and away from home activities ... I think that in 15 years I won’t feel such a conflict over being out working or at home. I’ll be either doing it or be at peace with not doing it. Perhaps I’ll have carved out a more comfortable niche for myself. I think I see women’s roles as much more flexible than I used to. I see a much greater need for women to develop employment skills and to plan for own financial futures.

*A college-educated sculptor tells her story of taking control of her life*

It never occurred to me that I'd do anything. Essentially I was groomed to be a charming, decorative, woman – good mate for a professional. Before I got a divorce I was frightened of the future. I stayed in a marriage I knew was wrong for me and afterwards found I was perfectly capable of raising my child by myself – capable of earning a living – not a great living – capable of not needing anyone ... I didn't let it happen. I decided that's what I wanted.

[Int.: Has the women's movement affected your life?] Morally [I] felt no shame about having lovers, being aggressive when it's necessary. I just felt a great deal more freedom to do what I felt I should do – up to going without bra in the summer. If you grew up in the 50s you'd realize what a change that meant.

Whereas I was raised with discipline imposed from outside it took many years to understand internal moral choices. I raised my daughter as I would like to have been raised ... She grew up with a feeling of strength, belief in self – able to cope with other people.

*An administrator, half time with public charitable organization, married with children*

A third story shows someone aware of, but dealing fairly happily with, the conflicts of motherhood, partnership and work.

Good thing about combining [work and family] is that I want to do all those things – work, be married and have children. All are allowing me to develop – it would be a loss to not have any one of those parts of my life.

[She went to an elite women's college] On a track to prepare me for any numbers of careers. Pushed not by parents but groupings in school ... [believed] center would be a man and children and his career would be the center of my life.

[Int.: Now?] What I want now is different. I have many parts of that original dream – what has changed most is that I no longer see my husband's career as central to my life or the family's life. I no longer see his career as my career. If could change anything: I would not have gotten married as young as I did.

[Int.: Major issues?]: job change, ending relationship with another man, aftermath[!!] [worries about ageing], feeling unattractive.

[Int.: Impact of ideas of the women's movement?] I've been very affected by them. I was in a woman's group for 4 years. I want more than I did and I think it's alright for me to have it – But I'm not sure.

[Int.: Hopes for children?] Also to give them a chance to see me working and way to behave as mother, wife and working person. They know I have conflicts about that.

For the ‘women in middle life’ of this study the years after graduation had brought the realization that their education had not prepared them for a career in a way they now wished. They had had to feel their way towards a satisfying fully rounded life and for many it seemed too late. One woman with an MA in education expressed that desire very clearly. She had become a children’s author and the satisfaction of that work was palpable: ‘I am self-supporting or can be. I enjoy what I’m doing. I feel competent. I get appreciation and ego gratification and I guess that’s about it – and also social stimulation’. Looking back at what she would change with hindsight she reflected:

I would have concentrated on doing work where I would have consistently worked at some money making job, and spent more time on myself. Spending more time again doing things that would have accrued to rewards, both financial and ego gratification rewards, that is things that would accrue to me.

Her work and her children, she claimed, brought her most pleasure.<sup>76</sup> Like many married respondents in the study she expressed reservations about her sexual life: ‘frequency an issue, husband gets very tired, he works late, no intercourse very often’ and was coming to terms with her own body after a mastectomy.

### *Role conflict: sexuality*

Although the sex life of respondents was not a major aspect of the role conflict investigated by Baruch and Barnett, issues around sexuality and its conflicts emerge vividly. The married women who expressed ambivalence about their sexual life had married at a time of the ascendance of strong Freudian views on sexuality. These views were often filtered through the more popular works of authors such as Lundberg

76 Baruch and Barnett, ‘Women in the middle years’.

and Farnham. Their 1947 book *The modern woman: the lost sex* was still reprinted in the 1950s. The title says it all. The goal of sexuality for women, they claimed, was ‘receptivity and passiveness, a willingness to accept dependence without fear and resentment, with a deep inwardness and readiness for the final goal of sexual life – impregnation’.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, feminists, they asserted, ‘when they came to perform the sexual act, found that they were frigid’. To be called frigid in the 1950s and 60s was the final insult and women, not surprisingly, sought to avoid it by meeting the expectations of the day. The women in the middle years study demonstrate both the unsatisfactory state of married sexuality for many women and the joys of rediscovery of a sexual self after the women’s movement gave them permission to be more experimental. One alarming interview opened a window onto a clearly difficult issue for a married couple.

The wife had marked sex as issue ‘once in a while’, and also wrote ‘no big horrendous problem’. The interviewer noted that the husband came in during this question and told his wife to tell the truth about sex – she said for him to please leave. He said it again and she said ‘leave, this is my interview’. Then he said ‘tell the girl the truth, if any good will come of it, that’s what she’s here for’. The interviewer wrote, ‘I thought they might have a fight’.<sup>78</sup>

This was a topic several did not want to discuss: ‘Sex – not as good as I would like. [I: felt you might have nervous breakdown?] – Yes! Can’t talk about it.’<sup>79</sup>

Others revelled in the new opportunities release from marriage offered. When asked about the impact of the women’s movement, one replied: ‘Morally felt no shame about having lovers, being aggressive when it’s necessary’. A divorced social worker and self-proclaimed feminist had more practical problems. She was asked whether the frequency of sex was an issue for her: ‘Yes, trying to fit in going with

77 Quoted in Elaine Tyler May, ‘Pushing the limits: 1940–1961’ in Nancy F. Cott (ed.), *No small courage: a history of women in the United States*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, p. 512.

78 Baruch and Barnett, ‘Women in the Middle Years’.

79 Ibid.

three different people and trying to keep that in balance and deal with kids. There's only three nights in a weekend and sleeping with people three nights in a row is something I worry about and think about.' However, she deemed her sex life 'very satisfying'. She highly valued 'my ability to support myself and my children – my independence'. This woman put paid to the Lundberg and Farnham link between feminism and frigidity.

### The demographic gaze: who was marrying and having babies?

In twenty-first century society there is widespread concern at the 'declining birthrate', the fact that on the whole young women are marrying later, if at all, and are producing on average fewer than the 2.1 children necessary to reproduce the population. In some societies, such as Japan and Italy, this is deemed to have reached crisis point. Desperate measures are suggested, such as the reintroduction of large baby bonuses and domestic training. Those who worry about this issue might well look at the family formation patterns of highly educated women, particularly at the highest achievers of the 1950s. They were the prototypes of the young educated women of today.

Of course the issue of declining birthrates is not new. In earlier times the 'new women' were blamed for turning away from motherhood for their selfish ends.<sup>80</sup> As women's involvement in higher education increased over the twentieth century so too did the interest of demographers in their family formation patterns. Women's propensity to have babies or to refuse to have them sparks off a number of deep-

80 Mackinnon, *Love and freedom*.

seated national fears.<sup>81</sup> It is well known that the higher a woman's level of education the fewer children she was likely to have and the later she was likely to produce them. While this phenomenon was easy to dismiss when a small proportion of the age group attended university, as the proportion of college goers increased it could not be so easily brushed aside.

Did having a degree exempt women from the norms of 1950s life? It may have done so early in the twentieth century but by the 1950s a Bachelors degree was sufficiently common, and having a higher degree was necessary for that exemption.<sup>82</sup> We can see that pattern when we look at the women with professional training and higher degrees. But how did these new young graduates shape their family lives? Were they different from their sisters who did not undertake higher education?

### *Age at marriage*

The decade of the fifties was the high point of marriage and the nuclear family. Some statistical patterns are useful here to set the parameters. In Australia the average age of marriage for women before the war of 24.7 years had dropped to 23.9 by 1940 and to 23.6 by 1954.<sup>83</sup> Not only was the age at marriage dropping but the percentage of women ever marrying was rising. In 1954, 58.84 per cent of women aged 20–24 were married, which was an 'Australian record of at least

81 See Alison Mackinnon, "'Bringing the unclothed immigrant into the world": gender and population policy during the twentieth century', *Journal of Population Research*, 17(2), 2000, pp. 109–123.

82 Patricia Albjerg Graham, 'The cult of true womanhood: past and present' in Eleanor Bender, Bobbie Burk and Nancy Walker (eds), *All of us are present: the Stephens College symposium. Women's education: the future*, James Madison Wood Research Institute, Columbia, MO, 1983.

83 W.D. Borrie, 'Australian family structure: demographic observations' in A.P. Elkin (ed.), *Marriage and the family in Australia*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1957, p. 11.

seventy years standing, and probably a good deal longer'.<sup>84</sup> By the ages of 35 to 39 over 91 per cent of women were married. In an Australian study 18.3 per cent of fifties graduates remained single, while over 81 per cent had married at some stage. While the figure of 81 per cent seems high in comparison to the 50 per cent of graduates of the first generation of university women who embraced wedlock, it was nevertheless lower than the population at large in the period.

'A ring by spring' at women's colleges was not a fantasy. Dean Nancy Lewis noted of the US: 'The picture of the married college girl has become a familiar one on every campus'.<sup>85</sup> Sydney graduate women too showed a trend to earlier marriage over several cohorts. While the oldest women, those over 60 who had graduated before 1901, married at an average age of just under 29 years, those aged forty to forty-nine (i.e. graduated by 1920) married two years younger on average and more of them married under 21 than over 40. In the youngest group, the cohort of our period, 6 per cent of the youngest women were under 21 when they married and a large number tied the knot by the age of thirty. They were far from immune to the trends of the day.

Graduates may have married earlier than previously but they continued to marry later and less often than non-graduates. They were a much smaller proportion of those Australian women married by the age of 20.

Women were also marrying at a younger age in the United States. Yet graduate women too were marrying less. The authors of *They went to college* (1952) claim that 31 per cent of women graduates of 1947 failed to marry compared to 13 per cent of all US women.<sup>86</sup> This however occurred shortly after the end of World War II and was to change rapidly throughout the fifties.

Other sources also show that age at marriage for graduates had declined but that they did, however, marry at a slightly higher age than non-graduates. Women in the US who married between 22 and 29 years of age had higher levels of education than those who married

84 Ibid.

85 Lewis, 'College women and their proper spheres', p. 210.

86 Havemann and West, cited in Horowitz, *Campus life*, p. 218.

aged 21 years or under.<sup>87</sup> Yohalem's high-achieving women who graduated from Columbia University between 1945 and 1951 were more likely to delay marriage or to remain unmarried than women of similar ages in the general population (28 per cent unmarried compared to 6 per cent) and especially so for women with a PhD (41 per cent unmarried).<sup>88</sup>

*Fertility rates: a spectacular rise*

In Australia, the mini-boom in fertility rates that resulted from more and earlier marriage was quite distinct. As one demographer pointed out: 'There was a slow rise in the birth-rate as economic conditions improved before 1939; but towards the end of and since the war the rise in the total number of births and in the birth-rate has been spectacular'.<sup>89</sup>

Dawson found that the trend towards earlier marriage in the general population was also evident among Australian graduate women but, although they were less likely to remain childless overall, they were more likely to delay child bearing. For example, though there were fewer childless women among the graduate women than in the general population (15 per cent compared to 19 per cent), graduates began their families later and had smaller families.<sup>90</sup> The Adelaide and Melbourne '50s graduate women showed a slightly different pattern: almost 30 per cent had no children, a very high proportion of childlessness for the time. Dawson's small group of women with Masters and doctoral degrees had even fewer children: 'the 12 women with doctorates had an average of 1.33 children per women, well below the

87 Hugh Carter and Paul Glick, *Marriage and divorce: a social and economic study*, Harvard University Press, Boston, MA, 1970, p. 92.

88 Alice Yohalem, 'Columbia University graduate students, 1945-1951: the vanguard of professional women' in Hulbert and Schuster, *Women's lives through time*, pp. 142-143.

89 Borrie, 'Australian family structure', p. 8.

90 Dawson, *Graduate and married*, pp. 33-34, 44-46.

sample average. One third of them had no children'.<sup>91</sup> This seems to bear out the idea that higher degrees in this period led to an exemption from the norms of the time.<sup>92</sup>

However, as in Australia, 1950s college woman in the United States married earlier and had more children compared to earlier cohorts of women graduates who more often remained single and childless.<sup>93</sup>

## Is this what they expected?

Regardless of actual outcomes, women expected a great deal of their marriages in America and in Australia in the 1950s.<sup>94</sup> Commentator Norman Mackenzie summarised the attitude to home-centredness in 1962 in his *Women in Australia*:

It is ... taken for granted that women are home-centred, and that there is something odd and rather undesirable about a woman who is making a career, or is active in public life outside a range of socially-approved types of women's work and women's interests. The 'normal' woman is expected to conform to the stereotype of femininity, seeking her satisfactions in house-pride and the care of the husband and children, finding her relaxation in card-parties, tennis or bowls, entertaining friends and relatives, tending the garden and watching television.<sup>95</sup>

91 p. 46.

92 Graham, 'The cult of true womanhood'.

93 Barbara Sicherman, 'College and careers: historical perspectives on the lives and work patterns of women college graduates' in John Mack Faragher and Florence Howe (eds), *Women and higher education in American history: essays from the Mount Holyoke College Sesquicentennial Symposia*, Norton, New York, 1988.

94 Giele, 'Women's role change and adaptation'; Brown and Pacini, 'The Vassar classes of 1957 and 1958'; Ravenna Helson, 'The Mills classes of 1958 and 1960: college in the fifties, young adulthood in the sixties' in Hulbert and Schuster, *Women's lives through time*.

95 Norman Mackenzie, *Women in Australia*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1962, p. 81.

A curious detail in Dawson's 1965 study examined the numbers of educated women who made their own clothes. Of the women aged 60 and over, 40 per cent made some and 2 per cent made all of their own clothes. This percentage rose with each younger cohort until in the youngest cohort, those women under 30, 70 per cent made some of their own their own clothes and 11 per cent made all of them.<sup>96</sup> Was this a response to postwar austerities or an excess of domesticity? It is not surprising that in this climate Jill Ker felt as she left Sydney for the United States in 1960 that she was leaving behind 'a culture hostile to aspiring women'.<sup>97</sup> Yet something in the climate was changing. It seems that graduate women expected to marry more quickly, to spend less time in paid employment, and to have larger families than they ultimately did, as we shall see.<sup>98</sup>

### *Marriage and career: is it elementary?*

If 'love and marriage, love and marriage' went together 'like a horse and carriage', as the popular song proclaimed, could marriage also be harnessed with career? This is a key point that will be developed more fully in Chapter 4 but it is worth briefly considering here. What did women expect at the time of their graduation? Only 5 per cent of Sydney women graduates expected to combine a university degree with marriage, but, Dawson concludes, 41 per cent actually did.<sup>99</sup> There were differences between the older women's expectations and those of women under 30 – those of our cohort. Only 18 per cent of women over 60 agreed that 'marriage is a full-time career', whereas 69 per cent of those under 30 thought that it was. Was this a reflection of the hard yards of experience or of the exposure of the younger women to the starry-eyed views of marriage portrayed by 1950s popular cul-

96 p. 51.

97 Conway, *True north*, p. x.

98 See especially Helson, 'The Mills classes of 1958 and 1960', pp. 193–194.

99 Dawson, *Graduate and married*, p. 123.

ture?<sup>100</sup> Women from a Roman Catholic religious background were more strongly of this view than others and of the view that ‘working women threaten family life’.<sup>101</sup> Most women, in both the US and Australia, expected to have more children than they ultimately produced. Few, in sum, anticipated the upheavals of the next decades, which would reshape their futures in so many ways.

It is a strange paradox that in a period when more and more women were attending colleges and universities and vast numbers were entering the workforce, society’s expectations for women could be so firmly rooted within the constrained life of the nuclear family. The very paradoxical nature of those circumstances meant that surveillance was more necessary than ever, becoming more hysterical in tone as women challenged those boundaries. Disciplinary rules in women’s colleges multiplied as they became increasingly ineffective. Regulatory regimes became more oppressive before crumbling completely a few years later.

The gaze that fell upon educated women was all pervasive. They were observed by their male peers, by those who were responsible for their well-being and their intact femininity and by the new breed of social scientists who swarmed into the field finding educated women a fruitful ground for research. But in the latter area educated women themselves were often the observers, gradually becoming the doers of research, rather than the subjects of it. Women began to see themselves differently. As Jill Ker Conway spoke of looking at herself ‘through the lens of history’, so many other women began to see themselves through the lens of sociology or psychology. They began to see that the lens was clouded by a male perspective, a male-inflected set of expectations, which did not gel with their view of women. But we are moving forward here to the discoveries of the 1970s and 80s. First we need to look more closely at the social, political and cultural milieu of the 1950s and early 60s. For within that troubled context lay both repression and the beginnings of escape.

100 p. 202.

101 p. 203.



## 2 Conservative times: Cold War, hot sex and the consumer revolution

The carpet of the 50s was woven of many colours, in fine threads, even if much of it was pastel, or fawn, or dove grey.<sup>1</sup>

The national context was an evil one.<sup>2</sup>

On New Year's Eve 1963 two deaths occurred in Sydney that mystified the country for decades. The semi-naked bodies of Dr Gilbert Bogle and Mrs Margaret Chandler were found, covered with cardboard and with no apparent injuries, in a lover's lane area of the Lane Cove River. As the coverage in the national press reached fever pitch and the coronial inquiry proceeded, a strange mix of the bohemian, the intellectual and the sexual emerged. Dr Bogle was a handsome and accomplished physicist, a former Rhodes scholar, a linguist and musician, married with four children and with a reputation for philandering. On the night in question he had attended a New Year's Eve party at the home of a colleague. His wife did not accompany him. Bogle was employed by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) as an astrophysicist but had recently resigned and was to take up an appointment in the United States. Mrs Margaret Chandler, trained as a nurse and a mother of two, had also attended the New Year's Eve party with her husband, Geoffrey, also a CSIRO employee, although not as senior as Bogle.

Part way through the party Geoffrey Chandler left to attend another gathering of a bohemian group on the far side of Sydney. There he spent time with his lover. He had reached an understanding with his wife Margaret that if she wished to stay and be with Gilbert Bogle, to whom she was obviously attracted, she was free to do so.

1 A.S. Byatt, *The whistling woman*, Vintage, London, 2003, p. 50.

2 Kerr, *The gold and the blue*, p. 28.

Bogle and Chandler left the party and sought privacy at the secluded river bank. Their bodies were found the next morning in grotesque positions, having been violently ill but modestly covered. As no signs of a struggle were found it was assumed that they had been poisoned, although a rigorous forensic inquiry failed to identify the poison. Theories as to the cause of death proliferated and Geoffrey Chandler became a prime suspect, although he was able to provide a watertight alibi. One of the most bizarre theories, found on websites to this day, developed a Cold War theme. Were Bogle and Chandler involved in espionage, given the scientific organization they worked for – and the emerging and important field of astrophysics? And had Bogle been murdered for that reason?

This case is still formally unsolved, although new theories have recently emerged. It fascinated Australians for a range of reasons. Perhaps the most astonishing for the period was the realization that in highly educated and well-to-do circles, in respectable leafy suburbs, some couples were ‘swingers’, allowing each other a degree of sexual latitude in an otherwise sexually repressed society. A mystery woman appeared at the inquest, later identified as one of Bogle’s lovers. She was not required to testify publicly so as not to offend. Some conventions had to be observed. The Bogle/Chandler case in all its deeply mystifying aspects raises some of the major themes for this chapter. Beneath the apparent quiet of suburban life was there, in certain circles at least, a stirring that belies the descriptions of the 1950s and early 60s as drab and colourless? Beneath the pastel, fawn and dove grey of the suburbs was something emerging that would reshape the lives of those who followed? Beneath a veneer of respectability sexual passions simmered. Subcultures did live differently, if well below the radar of popular culture. The untrusting climate of the Cold War led to suspicions of scientists engaged in little-understood activities and fostered beliefs of secret scientific findings.

Was the context of the 1950s and early 60s then ‘pastel’, ‘fawn’, ‘dove grey’ – all colourless, insipid tones, but ultimately safe? Or was it ‘evil’, in the far from insipid words of Clark Kerr? In Lane Cove, Sydney, it might be both. It could be evil and colourless, at different

times, in different places and to different actors in that ever-changing social fabric of the time. While life in the mushrooming suburbs and sleepy provincial towns might be fawn, even drab, in the hotbed of university politics and government witch-hunts it could appear distinctly evil. In this chapter I focus on three major defining aspects of those years, all of which brought with them other significant developments. I look first at the Cold War and all that followed in its path. Secondly I trace the growth of consumerism and its impact on the gender relations and popular culture of the time. Thirdly, I sketch the understandings of sexuality of the time, the psychological and therapeutic approaches to everyday life and to gender relations, the focus on Freud and his followers and their contribution to shaping women's lives. As well there were challengers to that view, such as Alfred Kinsey, with his startling revelations about sexual behaviour.

In reality these were not separate issues but intertwined and strongly overlapping, as the Bogle/Chandler case reveals. The Cold War *zeitgeist*, for instance, played a large part in consolidating a very specific view of gender relations. It also fostered divisions amongst feminist groups, leading to their decimation at this time.<sup>3</sup> Consumerism in America and Australia was saturated with gendered imagery and was used to differentiate the lives of their citizens from those in the Soviet Union. Equally the Cold War search for communists and other subversives ultimately narrowed the discourses available for teachers and students in universities and colleges in all areas, denying many of this cohort exposure to critical and progressive views on politics, on capitalism and on sex.

Several recent writers have argued that the Cold War destroyed the US left.<sup>4</sup> In Australia it split the Labor Party, the party of the left,

3 Pat Ranald, 'Women's organizations and the issue of communism' in Ann Curthoys and John Merritt (eds), *Better dead than red: Australia's first Cold War, 1945–1959, volume 2*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1986.

4 Noam Chomsky et al., *The Cold War and the university: toward an intellectual history of the postwar years*, New Press, New York, 1997; Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert (eds), *Rethinking Cold War culture*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC, 2001.

and ensured it remained out of office for decades. It was disastrous for Australian intellectual life.<sup>5</sup> Others argue that some elements remained as an elusive thread to be taken up by social movements of the 1970s.<sup>6</sup> Where labour radicals had been a strong if minority presence on campuses in both Australia and the United States in the immediate post-war years, by the mid-fifties they had all but disappeared. It is increasingly being recognized that the Cold War also derailed feminism from its earlier more radical and redistributive form to a cautious and liberal feminism in both the US and Australia.<sup>7</sup> At Smith College, for example, like many other American and Australian campuses, there had been a vocal group of progressive students and faculty who became increasingly subdued from the late 1940s.<sup>8</sup> Those who accused women of complicity in communism frequently saw them as ‘unwitting dupes’,<sup>9</sup> a view that denied them agency and reinscribed them as vulnerable to male influence. Women were not supposed to have a politics of their own.

At UCLA ‘professors approached radical ideological movements gingerly and critically if at all’.<sup>10</sup> At Smith, as elsewhere, progressivism was to disappear or reinvent itself in a different guise. During the 1950s in the United States dissenting views could rarely be expressed in political parties on university campuses but were displaced to reli-

5 John Docker, *Australian cultural elites: intellectual traditions in Sydney and Melbourne*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1974, p. 152.

6 Kate Weigand, *Red feminism: American communism and the making of women’s liberation*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD, 2001.

7 Joanne Meyerowitz, ‘Sex, gender, and the Cold War language of reform’ in Kuznick and Gilbert, *Rethinking Cold War culture*, p. 117; Landon R.Y. Storrs, ‘Red scare politics and the suppression of popular front feminism: the loyalty investigation of Mary Dublin Keyserling’, *Journal of American History*, 90(2), 2003, pp. 491–524; Ranald, ‘Women’s organizations and the issue of communism’; Weigand, *Red feminism*.

8 Renee Landrum, ‘*More firmly based today’: anti-communism, academic freedom, and Smith College, 1947–1956*, Honours thesis, American Studies Program, Smith College, Northampton, 1998.

9 Ranald, ‘Women’s organizations and the issue of communism’, p. 41.

10 Banner, *Finding Fran*, p. 109.

gious organizations and groups concerned with race, providing the seedbeds for the next generation of student activism. As Renee Landrum notes of the US, 'liberal opinions on racial issues were as far left as one could safely be in the age of anti-Communism'.<sup>11</sup> Even this was sometimes too far.

## The Cold War

At Cold War's end we can view with some distance the ways in which the tentacles of national hysteria encircled even the towers of academia, supposedly separate from political turmoil, in the post-World War II era. As several authors have shown recently, universities and colleges were not immune from the fear and paranoia that seized the free world.<sup>12</sup> For many that fear seemed justified. China had fallen to the Communists in 1949. The Korean War began in 1950 after North Korea invaded South Korea. Much of Eastern Europe was behind the 'Iron Curtain'. In Australia the 1954 Royal Commission on Espionage (the Petrov Commission) stirred simmering anxieties. In the United States McCarthyism traumatized a generation.

Although the start of the Cold War is generally dated from the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Japan, commentators see it as reaching its fullest expression in the 1950s.<sup>13</sup> In Australia a paradoxical

11 Landrum, 'More firmly based today', p. 46.

12 Ellen Schrecker, *No ivory tower: McCarthyism and the universities*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1986; Chomsky et al., *The Cold War and the university*; Kerr, *The gold and the blue*; Stuart Macintyre and R.J.W. Selleck, *A short history of the University of Melbourne*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2003; Fiona Capp, *Writers defiled*, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1993.

13 Kuznick and Gilbert, *Rethinking Cold War culture*; Stephen Alomes, Mark Dober and Donna Hellier, 'The social context of postwar conservatism' in Ann Curthoys and John Merritt (eds), *Better dead than red: Australia's first Cold War, 1945–1959, volume 1*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1984.

cal mix of economic growth on the one hand and perceived threats to security on the other led to the 'orchestrated anxiety of the Cold War'.<sup>14</sup> In spite of an ongoing rhetoric of progress, monocultural Australian society was fraught with fears and paranoia fuelled by sectarian rivalry between Catholics and Protestants, anxieties about high levels of immigration of people other than the Anglo-Celtic majority into Australia, and the need to renegotiate foreign relationships after World War II.<sup>15</sup> Turning from a weakened Britain to a strengthening America, Australians were no longer sure of their identities or allegiances.

Commentators on the period note a heightened sense of conformity characterized by educational conservatism, a growing moral conformity of social groups, increasing isolation in the suburbs, and very closed sexual subcultures between men and women.<sup>16</sup> Although these trends were by no means all-pervasive and small dissident political and cultural groups spoke out throughout, a conservative, conformist culture dominated. Artists and writers fled to more sympathetic pastures. Universities were seen as places of suspicion, their leftist professors possibly stirring subversion. Some spoke of 'pinkies' in universities, of campuses 'harbouring nests of communists'.<sup>17</sup> In 1952 the head of the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), Colonel Charles Spry, appointed by Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies, wrote to the prime minister: 'I am sure that you will readily appreciate the inadvisability of employing in any university lecturers who are likely to infest students with subversive doctrines'.<sup>18</sup> The use of the word 'infest' is far from innocent, conjuring up the notion of communists as vermin, to be eradicated at all costs.

14 Alomes et al., 'The social context of postwar conservatism', p. 2.

15 John Murphy, *Imagining the fifties: private sentiment and political culture in Menzies' Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2000.

16 Alomes et al., 'The social context of postwar conservatism', pp. 18–27; Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath and Marion Quartly, *Creating a nation, 1788–1990*, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1994, p. 275.

17 Alomes et al., 'The social context of postwar conservatism', p.10.

18 Macintyre and Selleck, *A short history of the University of Melbourne*, p.103.

At the University of Melbourne, considered the ‘reddest’ of Australian universities, Spry searched for such subversives. He found ‘grounds for suspicion in no fewer than sixty-three of them’. Historians were well represented amongst these. Sylvia Dowling, President of the Melbourne University Historical Society in 1954, was probably unaware that her request to the Hon. Arthur Caldwell MHR to address a public meeting for the centenary of the goldminers’ rebellion at Eureka would result in her listing in the ASIO files. Caldwell’s office requested advice of the Attorney-General’s Department as to how to reply to Miss Dowling. As a result of the request on 20 September 1954,

Mr Caldwell was informed ... verbally that:

- a) Miss Sylvia Dowling was unknown to this office
- b) The Melbourne University Historical Society was not adversely known to this office.

However ‘In connection with Sylvia Dowling, the possibility exists that she has some relationship with DOWLING [sic] Mary Leonore [word deleted], recorded in this office as at one time a Committee member of the MELBOURNE UNIVERSITY PEACE CLUB’.<sup>19</sup> Peace clubs and their followers were usually seen as communist fronts.

At the Labor Club Review later that year two women students appeared as innocent history students singing:

We’re red, we’re red, he’d rather see us dead  
Devoid of any intellect,  
The facts we learn are incorrect ...<sup>20</sup>

How quickly the climate had changed at Melbourne University from that described by Amirah Inglis in 1945: ‘But we were all Labor Club members, arguing passionately about socialism with Catholics and conservatives, agitating for a socialist Australia and, in the short run,

19 ASIO Files, Memo for Headquarters, letterhead Attorney-General’s Department, Melbourne, headed ‘Secret’, 27 October 1954.

20 Macintyre and Selleck, *A short history of the University of Melbourne*, p. 104.

for a more just post-war world'.<sup>21</sup> From 1946 to 1948, Inglis argues, Labor Club members dominated the Students Representative Council at the University of Melbourne and 'within it' the Communist Party members – 'the fraction' – decided who was to stand for the executive positions'.<sup>22</sup> 'We were for world peace', Inglis explains, 'but also for class war and our words were filled with the imagery of war'.<sup>23</sup> Describing their 'starry-eyed idealism' Inglis and her Labor Club friends believed that 'the poorest he and she, once they had dared to reach beyond their grasp, could change the world'.<sup>24</sup> For Inglis, university in the late 1940s proved, in her terms, socially, politically and sexually liberating. Yet on leaving the campus the personal choices were few for the young woman and her communist lover Ian Turner. Marriage was the only real possibility if they were to continue their relationship. So Inglis began 1949 as a wife and Communist Party worker. She proudly joined the editorial team of *The Guardian*, the official organ of the Communist Party, and attended party meetings at night. In the same year, ominously, the Liberal Club (in Australian parlance the conservatives) 'had broken left-wing control of the Students Representative Council (SRC)'.<sup>25</sup>

Yet for all the suspicion, the anti-communist climate in Australian society and universities was never as chilly as in the US. The 1951 referendum to ban the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) failed, albeit narrowly. Had the 1950 *Communist Dissolution Act* not been declared unconstitutional, the situation may well have been much worse. It has been argued that the Act not only sought to proscribe communists but also communist sympathizers who could be defined widely as 'a person who supports or advocates the objectives, policies, teachings, principles or practices of communism as expounded by

21 Amirah Inglis, *The hammer and the sickle and the washing up: memories of an Australian woman communist*, Hyland House, South Melbourne, 1995, p. 15.

22 p. 23.

23 p. 26.

24 p. 30.

25 Macintyre and Selleck, *A short history of the University of Melbourne*, p. 119.

Marx and Lenin'.<sup>26</sup> Affiliated associations that came under suspicion were defined imprecisely as those, 'the policy of which is ... influenced, wholly or substantially, by persons who ... are communists'.<sup>27</sup> Under this rubric ASIO was deeply suspicious of such diverse groups as the Fellowship of Australian Writers, the School of Modern Writers, Realist Film Societies, the United Association of Women, the International Women's Day Committee, the Australia Peace Council and the National Union of University Students.<sup>28</sup> But for all that June Factor, an arts student at Melbourne University, claims that even in the second half of the 1950s, 'when the Cold War was at its iciest and words like "peace" and "socialism" were never printed in the press without their pejorative inverted commas', left-wing views could be found on campus.<sup>29</sup>

But something vital was lost. The heady idealism of Amirah Inglis had gone. Jill Ker, teaching in the history department at Sydney University after completing her degree, was advised by a sympathetic female colleague: 'Go somewhere where you can see things from another perspective. Whatever you do don't just stay here'.<sup>30</sup>

The infamous case of philosophy professor Sydney Sparkes Orr, dismissed in 1956 from the University of Tasmania for seducing a female student, not only revealed the fear of communism endemic in Australian universities of the time but the egregious misogyny.<sup>31</sup> The story, which I shall elaborate later, reveals a sordid tale of respected Australian male professors, in the name of academic freedom, smearing the name and reputation of a female student who had had the te-

26 Jenny Hocking, 'Cairns, Keon and the battle for Yarra: a microcosm of Labor split politics' in Peter Love and Paul Strangio (eds), *Arguing the Cold War*, Red Rag, Carlton North, Vic, 2001, p. 51.

27 Ibid.

28 p. 52.

29 June Factor, 'June Factor' in Hume Dow (ed.), *More memories of Melbourne University: undergraduate life in the years since 1919*, Hutchinson, Hawthorn, Vic, 1985, p. 129.

30 Conway, *The road from Coorain*, p. 215.

31 Cassandra Pybus, *Gross moral turpitude*, William Heineman Australia, Melbourne, 1993.

merity to report a case of ‘gross moral turpitude’ before the term sexual harassment had been invented. From the perspective of Cold War fears, however, it is significant that the University of Tasmania chose to appoint a professor with dubious, indeed fraudulent, qualifications above other more worthy candidates on the grounds of his apparent anti-communism and, ironically, his moral integrity. In this context, Cassandra Pybus argues, ‘what may seem today like rampant paranoia was common enough, and acceptable, in the late 1950s, with World War II not yet a distant memory and the hysteria of the Cold War rife’.<sup>32</sup> Defenders of Professor Orr managed to convince themselves that the womanizing professor had been framed by a totalitarian dictatorship, that tactics such as brainwashing were in play, with little evidence but fevered imaginations to support them.<sup>33</sup> Young women with courage who accused their male professors had little chance in such a time and few defenders.

For older women who had been part of the political ferment of the thirties and forties the fifties represented a retreat. From 1945 to 1951 Ruby Payne-Scott, a physics graduate, was a leading Australian radio astronomer, helping to lay the foundations of a new branch of science. She was also a strong exponent of women’s rights. Ruby Payne-Scott’s experience of the Australian Cold War climate led her to silence about her scientific past. However politics was not the deciding factor in her retreat from radio astronomy. Payne-Scott was known as a supporter of Americans caught up in McCarthyism and had also helped form a union at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) where she worked, an act that inevitably brought her under suspicion. Thus she was a target for an ASIO investigation. ASIO was known to be sensitive to left-wing influence in the Division of Radio Physics, particularly in wartime, and they maintained a lengthy file on Ruby Payne-Scott. One entry reads: ‘She is a queer girl. A bright student but very erratic, was a member of the University Christian Union which seems to be a forerunner of activity in leftist

32 p. 149.

33 p. 176.

groups. It's thought that she is in a feminist group. I would not put anything beyond her'.<sup>34</sup> In spite of much investigation, and the presence of an informer in the CSIRO, ASIO concluded that there was no evidence that Miss Payne-Scott was a member of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). This was an extraordinary acknowledgment of ineptitude (or of the loyalty of friends and colleagues) as Payne-Scott was a member of the CPA and others in the lab all knew it. The crucial fact for Payne-Scott's resignation was her marriage to Bill Hall, which she kept secret for several years. Married women in the public service were expected to resign.

Her eventual pregnancy led to the exposure of her marriage and to her inevitable resignation. This seems to have been regretted by all concerned including the CEO of the CSIRO. He wrote: 'Unfortunately, we cannot give married women leave without pay but I assure you that I at least would be very pleased to see you return to radio physics in due course'.<sup>35</sup> Ruby Payne-Scott did not return to radio physics, devoting the next twelve years of her life to her two children, then turning to part-time teaching. In this she was typical of many graduate women of the time. Yet her strong feminism and communism, shared by a small group in the 1940s, was hidden from view until recently under the earlier less nuanced picture of the 1950s. Her experience illuminates the damping down of both the political culture of the fifties and the possibilities for feminism. Ruby Payne-Scott retreated from a highly professional career amongst male colleagues in an area deemed unsuitable for women to a traditional combination of marriage and school teaching.

Ruby Payne-Scott's sanitized fifties and sixties experience can be compared with that of an American, Mary Dublin Keyserling. In 1964 Keyserling was appointed by President Lyndon B. Johnson as head of the US Women's Bureau. This was a senior and influential appointment, a triumph even for women, although, as Landon Storrs points

34 Item read by Dr Miller Goss in 'Ruby Payne-Scott: radio astronomer' on *The science show*, presented by Robyn Williams, ABC Radio, 14 February 2004.

35 Letter from F.W.G. White, read by Dr Miller Goss on *The science show*, ABC Radio, 14 February 2004.

out, radical feminists of the 1960s and 1970s tended to reject women like Keyserling ‘as part of the repressive liberal establishment’.<sup>36</sup> Yet during the 1940s Mary Dublin Keyserling, Barnard alumna of 1930, a talented economist and statistician, held key positions of authority across the US federal bureaucracy. Like many other women in the administration of the time Keyserling was a ‘left-leaning feminist’ and a believer in ‘the social democratic potential of the New Deal’.<sup>37</sup> What links the stories of Keyserling and Payne-Scott are the events of the intervening years of the Cold War, specifically the increasingly conservative politics of the time, ‘red scare politics’ in Storrs’ term, and the hostility to feminism that accompanied them. Both women had their burgeoning careers totally derailed, both retreated from the workforce, returning later with their more active pasts subdued, hidden even, in the climate of constraint into which they re-emerged. Both faced accusations of disloyalty, a powerful tool in silencing both present action and the representation of the past. Keyserling underwent a lengthy loyalty investigation. As well, Payne-Scott faced the narrow prescriptions for married women, an equally limiting tendency in the 1950s. Where were highly educated women’s loyalties to reside in this difficult time? This is one of the intriguing questions of the period.<sup>38</sup>

There were many in Australia and the US who were well aware of the threat to institutions that the Cold War fears engendered. University women from an earlier generation were well to the fore. In Melbourne, as Cold War rhetoric bit, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, much loved university lecturer in British history and a foundation member of the Melbourne University Labor Club, recounted the Putney Debates as

36 Storrs, ‘Red scare politics’, p. 524.

37 p. 496.

38 See also Weigand, *Red feminism* and, for an example of the severing of the link between left feminism, peace activism and social reform, see Amy Swerdlow, ‘The Congress of American Women; left-feminist peace politics in the Cold War’ in Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris and Kathryn Kish Sklar (eds), *US history as women’s history: new feminist essays*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1995.

‘oblique commentaries on the referendum to ban communism’.<sup>39</sup> A history student in Adelaide was shocked when her student newspaper in the early 1950s asked students if they were prepared to ‘dob in’ a ‘pinko’.<sup>40</sup> Many were.

Women teachers in Australia, who agitated for equal pay throughout the 1950s, frequently came under suspicion, particularly if they were involved with teacher unions. Lucy Woodcock, ‘whose CV is a snapshot of the left intelligentsia in the middle decades of the twentieth century’<sup>41</sup> suffered for her left-wing involvements. Lucy was a member of the New South Wales Teachers Federation from 1918, served on the executive from 1924 to 1953, and was senior vice-president from 1934 to 1953. She was the first woman president of the Australian Teachers’ Federation. Her other affiliations included the NSW Peace Movement, the Australia–China Society, the Australia–Soviet Friendship Society, the New Education Fellowship, the International Women’s Day Council, the Left Book Club, the Australian Civil Rights Defence League, Jessie Street’s Australian Women’s Charter and the Equal Pay Committee. ‘The Australian Aborigines Evangelical Fellowship’, Theobald tells us, ‘was set up at a meeting at her Enfield flat in 1956, in Faith Bandler’s words, because she was one of the only white people they trusted’.<sup>42</sup> Given the flashpoint issues of links with China and with the Soviets, as well as her concern with women’s issues, with peace and with racial equality, and a proven international outlook, Woodcock was typical of the type of left progressivism that flourished before World War II. She was also bound to attract the eye of ASIO and the anti-communist agitators. ASIO kept a detailed file on her.<sup>43</sup> In 1954, in the heightened atmosphere of the Petrov Royal Commission, Woodcock was initially de-

39 Macintyre and Selleck, *A short history of the University of Melbourne*, p. 120.

40 Interview, ‘Graduating in the fifties’ project.

41 Marjorie Theobald, “‘Red’ women in the teaching profession, 1930–1960”, paper presented at ANZHES Thirtieth Annual Conference, Adelaide, 6–9 December 2001, p. 3.

42 p. 3.

43 p. 3.

nied a passport to attend the Stockholm Peace Conference and, following that, the International Alliance of Women conference in Denmark and an accompanying women's summer school.<sup>44</sup> Teachers were also to attract attention in the United States as we shall see, particularly those with that trinity of subversive interests: women, peace and racial equality.

In the US, fear of communism was manifest most noticeably in the witch-hunts of the McCarthy period, the House Un-American Activities Commission (HUAC) inquisitions that devastated individual lives and reputations. The Cold War touched far more than those who faced the HUAC investigators, however. The significance of the Federal Loyalty-Security Program has long been overshadowed by a focus on McCarthyism though it involved a much larger part of the population. California was one of the states at the heart of the communist scare, not surprisingly as it has always had a unique link with the American Communist Party.<sup>45</sup> It was not only Hollywood that suffered. Clark Kerr, former Chancellor of the University of California, a man with a background in industrial relations, identifies the loyalty oath controversy of 1949–50 at the University of California as one of the most bitter confrontations between a Board of Trustees and its faculty in all American university history.<sup>46</sup> The vigorous and protracted attacks on the university by the California legislature's Committee on Un-American Activities, he argues, politicized the board of regents and the Berkeley faculty. Berkeley was to some extent a paradox, symbolizing both the rise of the research university, embedded in the military-industrial complex, but also (possibly because of that link) at the heart of political controversies. Yet it suffered disproportionately for its leftist reputation. Of 69 faculty members dismissed for their political views across the US during the McCarthy period, Kerr claims, 31 were at the University of California.<sup>47</sup> In June 1949 the

44 Rana, 'Women's organizations and the issue of communism', p. 54.

45 Gerald Home, 'The reddening of the women', *Science and Society*, 66(4), 2002–03, pp. 506–510.

46 Kerr, *The gold and the blue*, p. xxviii.

47 p. 27.

Board of Regents adopted the requirement of an oath that included the words: 'I am not a member of the Communist Party'.<sup>48</sup> As well as the 31 who were dismissed for not signing the oath several others resigned in protest including Erik Erikson who moved to Yale. The Californian loyalty committee was one of the most long lived: Kerr notes, 'the real targets were the liberals'.<sup>49</sup>

Lois Banner (then Wendland), a student at UCLA in the 1950s, experienced the impact of McCarthyism on young people, describing the conservative curriculum she studied: 'The sense of national superiority generated by World War II in addition to the anti-communism of those years dampened radical criticism in general and influenced my professors towards centrism and cynicism'.<sup>50</sup> 'They approached radical ideologies gingerly and critically, if at all.' The most leftish book Banner read was Jack Kerouac's *On the road*, a rallying call for the beat movement of the 1950s but one supremely uninterested in politics. Banner too noted the longevity of the loyalty oath. She had to sign it to work part-time in a university office.<sup>51</sup> The ban on Communist speakers on campus was not lifted until 1963.

Helen Laville argues that 'the image of the happy housewife, which has come to dominate our idea of American women in the 1950s, should be understood not as historical fact but as a cultural fantasy'.<sup>52</sup> She notes that many historians are now challenging the conventional historical wisdom on women's political inactivity and domestic isolation but that this work has yet to influence accounts of women's role in the Cold War. 'While gender is becoming an increasingly central trope to studies of the Cold War, women as actors, rather than as symbols, metaphors and poster-girls for American democracy, remain elusive'.<sup>53</sup> Laville examines the political activity of American

48 p. 28.

49 p. 49.

50 Banner, *Finding Fran*, p. 109.

51 Ibid.

52 Helen Laville, *Cold War women: the international activities of American women's organisations*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2002, p. 2.

53 pp. 7-8.

women's organizations in the Cold War. She points to the way in which women's organizations claimed a role for educated women in international affairs, based on traditional notions of an essentialist female identity that stressed nurturing and pacifist leanings. 'American women's organisations in the post-war period were determined to claim and justify an international role for themselves', she notes, '[arguing] forcefully that they had an interest in and understanding of women of other nations because their shared identity and experience created an "international sisterhood"'.<sup>54</sup> This was clearly a view shared by Australian Lucy Woodcock and many other women throughout the world. 'The atomic threat increased women's claims of political obligation by making the penalty for ignoring that obligation monstrous. The threat of atomic destruction gave new urgency to the age-old wisdom that women could, if they made the effort, divert men from their aggressive ways'.<sup>55</sup> The Committee on the Cause and Cure of War (CCCW), a coalition of nine organizations, and the Committee of Women in World Affairs (CWWA) both called for the inclusion of more women in international affairs.<sup>56</sup>

Cold War anxieties were also used to bolster claims for a greater role for women at a national level. The American Association of University Women (AAUW) petition to President Truman in 1950 argued that the US could not afford to waste women's 'abilities and energies'.<sup>57</sup> These were 'voluntary' organizations as Laville points out: 'The involvement of the leaders of American women's associations in government, albeit on an ad hoc and unofficial basis, diminished in their eyes the urgency of demands and efforts to increase the number of women in policy-making roles'.<sup>58</sup> She suggests that 'voluntary associations counted success in terms of gaining federal attention, but not necessarily federal appointments',<sup>59</sup> such that 'co-operation between the

54 pp. 25–26.

55 p. 28.

56 p. 32.

57 pp. 33–34.

58 p. 22.

59 p. 23.

leaders of American women's organisations and their government, channelled through the Women's Bureau, created a partnership between the private and public spheres'.<sup>60</sup> Leaders of women's organizations exchanged expertise and goodwill for involvement and status in international affairs especially relating to the education of women.

It is worth looking more closely at one of those organizations, the American Association of University Women, and its role in the Cold War. Highly educated women were again caught in a difficult bind, wanting to reject communism but concerned that the methods to do so were eroding hard fought freedoms. In January 1951 the editorial of the *Journal of the American Association of University Women* was headed 'Education in mobilization'. It grimly noted: 'As we go to press, the declaration of a national emergency is immanent'.<sup>61</sup> Dr Lois Meek Stolz worried that 'This is 1950 and these are serious and troubled days'.<sup>62</sup>

Ina Corinne Brown continued the theme, declaring that not only 'our political and economic freedom' was at stake, but 'our freedom as individuals to think, speak and worship is threatened'.<sup>63</sup> Brown, a professor of social anthropology at Scarritt College, saw the threats coming from two major directions: either from war itself or from the debilitating fear of war. 'Whether this remains a cold war or becomes a full-scale conflict, we face the peril of either rapid or long-drawn-out disorganization and deterioration of our society as the result of prolonged tension and repeated crises', she predicted. Furthermore she worried that in this state of mobilization and semi-mobilization the US would lose the very values that 'made our lives worth living'.<sup>64</sup>

60 p. 63.

61 'Editorial: education in mobilization', *Journal of the American Association of University Women*, 44(2), 1951, p. 67.

62 Dr Lois Meek Stolz, *Journal of the American Association of University Women*, 44(3), 1951, p. 134.

63 Ina Corinne Brown, 'We can make history', *Journal of the American Association of University Women*, 44(2), 1951, p. 131.

64 Ibid.

Not all members were impressed with the rhetoric of the journal or its political leanings. Mary Beard, writing to her friend Marine Leland, a professor at Smith College, snorted:

If only some one in the AAUW could laugh, what a boon to that organization and to outsiders that would be! ... Their 'packaged thinking' seems never to burst a package. When I saw in the last AAUW *Journal* that Truman was called 'Commander of the Nation', I threw that issue into the fire – too mad to have it in sight. I shall not renew my membership in such a stupid organization.<sup>65</sup>

During this period, educated women, particularly those in senior positions, worried a great deal about the impact of the Cold War on their liberties and values. Among those values was a strong belief in the individual. Brown's fear of the threat to individual freedom was widely shared by intellectuals who feared a loss of individualism in the conformist, other-directed mass society of the time. In the United States then as now the individual was paramount. Susan B. Riley, in her presidential address, spelt out the pre-eminence of that concept: 'On individualism; the concept of the importance of the individual, singly and organized into social groups and his [sic] freedom to determine the manner of his life has been basic to the American democratic experiment', she claimed. However, she worried that 'Suspicion, accusation, condemnation before proof of guilt is established' were 'cutting at the roots of self-assertion and encouraging the safety of negativism'.<sup>66</sup>

This was a time of major mobilization. The US Department of Defence sought to recruit 72,000 young men by the end of June 1952. In keeping with her ideas of equality for women, Mildred McAfee Horton, former President of Wellesley, argued that women should also be drafted.<sup>67</sup> Throughout the early 1950s the *Journal of the AAUW*, the

65 Beard to Leland, 17 February 1951, Leland Collection, College Archives, Smith College.

66 Susan B. Riley, 'Presidential address: we choose the future', *Journal of the AAUW*, 49(1), 1955.

67 Mildred McAfee Horton, 'Drafting women for the armed forces', *Journal of the AAUW*, 44(3), 1951, p. 141.

national mouthpiece of university women, agonized over the ramifications of both the threat to the country and the even graver threat to individual freedom. The McCarthy era and the calls to testify to the House Un-American Activities Committee rocked the world of educated people, frequently under suspicion. Although the explicit target of the investigation was members of the communist party or communist sympathizers, Clark Kerr's contention that 'the real targets were the liberals'<sup>68</sup> seems justified.

Again in 1951 in a piece titled 'Making freedom a reality' Althea Hottel pointed out that the world of independent thought was in peril. She identified sources of danger: the external power of the Soviet Union; and the fact that 'some of our citizens ... endeavour to sap the strength of our nation through subversive activities' (and, she noted approvingly, 'we must have loyal Americans in our government, our schools and our industries'). But equally she feared that we might be losing the right to differ and in some instances the right to a fair trial, claiming that 'thinking men and women must be equally concerned with the preservation of individual liberty'. Like Brown she feared that Americans might be facing the 'slow disintegration' and the disorganization of their social institutions.<sup>69</sup>

Hottel advanced a further, more radical, claim. How could the US preach democracy if not all its citizens were enfranchised? She urged that in order to spearhead democracy America must overcome the racism within its own house. This theme was taken up by others who wrote for the AAUW journal. 'Our failure to guarantee full equality and full freedom to some of our citizens undermines our integrity in the United Nations and abroad', wrote Edith Sampson, who had worked for the UN.<sup>70</sup> Even within that climate of fear some women saw opportunities to advance issues they held dear, particularly at international level. They evinced similar concerns for peace, for

68 Kerr, *The gold and the blue*, p. 49.

69 Althea Hottel, 'Making freedom a reality', *Journal of the AAUW*, 44(4), 1951, p. 196.

70 Edith Sampson, 'Freedom and responsibility', *Journal of the AAUW*, 44(4), 1951, p. 6.

women's issues and for racial equality as the Australian women. But a more specifically American fear can be seen in Moran's concern. Voicing a common anxiety, Frances Moran of the International Federation of University Women claimed that the masses were taking control. The only way of having free government, she declared, is in educating the masses.<sup>71</sup>

University women saw their role primarily as educators. Many agreed with Ina Corinne Brown that the special concern of university women should be the presentation and strengthening of a free and democratic public school system. Brown argued that 'in many areas our public schools are threatened by both communist and fascist individuals and groups who seek to control the schools for their own ends'.<sup>72</sup> This was attempted through 'so-called economy drives, attacks on any and all new education methods, efforts to intimidate teachers and school officials by special loyalty oaths and whispering or smear campaigns, attempts to ban certain books from school libraries and to control the selection of textbooks'.<sup>73</sup>

Brown might have been speaking about the Canoga Park case in California, one such witch-hunt, although it occurred a few years earlier. Two senior and well-respected teachers of 'Senior Problems', journalism and student government at Canoga Park High School were called before a Californian Joint Legislative Fact Finding Committee on Un-American Activities (the Tenney Committee) in 1946 to answer charges of subversion. The two women were accused apparently on the evidence of a disgruntled former student who felt that they had not commented sufficiently favourably about capitalism. They were questioned about their subjects, their teaching methods, extracurricular activities and the organizations to which they belonged. In the course of the enquiry the teachers' association with various organizations deemed to be communist fronts was raised: the American Federation of Teachers caused concern. Perhaps this federation did have

71 Frances Moran, *Journal of the AAUW*, 44(4), 1951, p. 12.

72 Ina Corinne Brown, *Journal of the AAUW*, 45(2), 1952, p. 68.

73 Ibid.

something in common with its Australian counterpart, which was communist-led at this point.<sup>74</sup>

An LA Board of Education initially cleared the teachers, a decision that the Tenney Committee considered a whitewash. The transcripts of this case are preserved in a bound booklet in the papers of Mellie Miller Calvert, a historian of Canoga Park High School, who taught science at the school.<sup>75</sup> She was a keen advocate of developing warm relations with alumni, a very sensible notion as it turned out. Calvert was incensed at the investigations and felt, presciently, that citizens needed to be alerted to dangers ahead. She took it upon herself to collect the transcripts and to write an article to *The Clearing House: A Journal for Modern Junior and Senior High School Faculties*. ‘Only the alumni can save you: what happened when a school faced “red” charges’ she titled her article, ensuring that its message could not be missed.<sup>76</sup> And the alumni did come out in droves for their teachers, forming a Fair Action Committee, circulating petitions, lobbying meetings of the Board of Education and testifying that they were taught ‘American methods and ideals’, rather than the ‘pro-Russian’ thinking for which they were accused. Dozens wrote letters. It took four days for the testimony volunteered by alumni and parents to be heard.<sup>77</sup>

The Senior Problems course, the root of the concern, was required as a prerequisite for graduation. Investigators were concerned that the open discussion of controversial issues was permitted in these classes, and that students were encouraged to debate issues and discuss political candidates in class. Those testifying for the teachers felt differently. They claimed that the school produced ‘citizens of high quality’, who ‘cared about intellectual integrity, freedom, truth and jus-

74 Theobald, ““Red” women in the teaching profession’.

75 Mellie Miller Calvert papers, 1938–1960, Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

76 Mellie M. Calvert, ‘Only the alumni can save you: what happened when a school faced “red” charges’, *The Clearing House. A Journal for Modern Junior and Senior High Schools*, 21(6), 1947, pp. 323–325.

77 pp. 324–325.

tice'.<sup>78</sup> The course also aimed to develop international thinking, code to committees such as Tenney's for subversive comparisons with their own country's way of life, a challenge perhaps to an unthinking patriotism.

Encouraging students to think critically was dangerous ground. Teaching social studies in South Australia in the mid-fifties, one young woman was warned against teaching 'contemporary political material'. 'I said the students' questions have to be dealt with, they have a right to question ... Within two days I had a visit from the Inspector ... asking to see my exercise books to assess the way in which I was teaching social studies, to see what kind of bias I was putting on it', she recalls.<sup>79</sup> Although this young teacher was discouraged from teaching about Cold War ideologies (she had bravely sent a copy of Karl Marx's manifesto to an interested parent) no harmful consequences followed.

The American Association of University Women (AAUW) took a cautious stand against the excesses of McCarthyism, trying to tread a fine line between condemning communism but, equally, deploring fascist methods of control. This was spelled out in a statement prepared by the Social Studies Committee in 1953 and adopted by the AAUW Board. The statement was unequivocal in its title 'The communist threat to freedom and democracy'. It began: 'Let us be explicit. Communism is a threat to freedom and democracy. We are against it'. It continued: 'Fascism is likewise a threat to freedom and democracy. We are against it. The use of totalitarian means to fight communism and fascism is a threat to freedom and democracy. We are against it. The differences between democratic and totalitarian values are clear. Let us list some of them ...'<sup>80</sup>

One of those differences of course was the importance of the freedom of the individual. And that could be developed through education, as those defending the Canoga Park teachers argued.

Above all, AAUW women saw their role as educators as paramount, a view that dovetailed well with the 1950s insatiable drive for

78 p. 324.

79 Anonymous survey respondent, 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

80 *Journal of the AAUW*, 46(2), 1953, p. 67.

school teachers. Local AAUW branches undertook campaigns to strengthen local schools and many women joined school PTAs and other groups. The educated individual had to be able to oppose false thinking and empty slogans. But how were women to oppose the sloganizing, the conformity of their time and in what settings?

The answer came in an unexpected way from Adlai Stevenson in a commencement address to the Smith College class of 1955.<sup>81</sup> The very best of western civilization was embodied in the independent individual, Stevenson claimed, urging the graduating class at the elite women's college to embrace their future roles as housewives and mothers. There they could *influence* those supreme beings, 'typical Western man – or typical Western husband' and their children, to think in ways that rejected conformity and the drift towards totalitarian collectivism.<sup>82</sup> 'You may be hitched to one of these creatures we call "Western man"', Stevenson declared, 'and I think part of your job is to keep him Western, to keep him truly purposeful, to keep him whole'.<sup>83</sup>

Stevenson's particular target was 'adjustment', which he equated with 'groupers and conformers'. These undesirables needed to be balanced by independent thinkers, those who were 'more idiosyncratic', with open minds. 'Women', he claimed, 'especially educated women such as you, have a unique opportunity to influence us, man and boy, and to play a direct role in the unfolding drama of our free society'.<sup>84</sup> Reminding the graduating class that 'women had never had it so good', he suggested, perhaps in an attempt at humour, that they could be sure to 'keep their man straight on the differences between Botticelli and Chianti'.<sup>85</sup>

81 Adlai E. Stevenson, 'Smith College commencement', 6 June 1955, Smith College Archives.

82 p. 3, original emphasis.

83 p. 4.

84 p. 5; see also Ruth Rosen, *The world split open: how the modern women's movement changed America*, Viking, New York, 2000.

85 Stevenson, 'Smith College commencement', p. 6.

A former student who heard this message recalls that she felt insulted and that many other probably felt the same.<sup>86</sup> Three years later the commencement address was given by Senator John F. Kennedy, who took a very different approach. He asked the class of '58 'to accept the obligation and opportunity of participation in the public solution of the great problems of our time'.<sup>87</sup> Kennedy saw the same problems as Stevenson – the need to meet the 'single-minded advance of the communists', to counter 'the mobilization of a totalitarian society' – but his solution included women as social actors, not merely as influences on their husbands and children.<sup>88</sup>

The AAUW was also concerned with countering conformity and misinformation with critical thinking. In response to the sloganizing of the times the AAUW reported in 1952 on a symposium on 'propaganda in American life today'. In 1953 one writer reported worryingly of the need to distribute material on the United Nations, often under suspicion in the period, to counter those 'concerned with spreading apathy and antagonism towards the UN'.<sup>89</sup> The fear of spreading propaganda was fuelled by a worrying concern that if individuals did not resist the 'group think', the conformity of suburban life, they would be prey to communism and fascism. How could the individual be strengthened to have a mind of their own? What would this mean for women? Above all it was important to understand the individual's psychology and to train them to resist the blandishments of propaganda and advertising.

86 Alison Prentice, personal communication, 19 March 2004.

87 John F. Kennedy, 'Smith College commencement address', presented at Smith College, Northampton, MA, 8 June 1958, p. 7.

88 p. 9.

89 Janet Macdonald, 'The advantages of danger', *Journal of the AAUW*, 46(2), 1953, p. 53.

## Swaying the masses: the rise of consumerism

The need to resist both propaganda and advertising ran counter to the vast build up of both manufacturing of goods and the push to consume. Lizabeth Cohen suggests that consumption had close ties to the Cold War, that it provided ‘powerful symbolism as the prosperous American alternative to the material deprivations of communism’.<sup>90</sup> She argues that consumption was central to many Americans’ lives, and that it was a more potent shaping factor for many than Cold War developments. ‘In the postwar Consumers’ Republic’, Cohen claims, ‘a new ideal emerged – the *purchaser as citizen* – as an alluring compromise’.<sup>91</sup> In this context, she argues, the consumer satisfying material wants actually served the national interest, economic recovery being dependent on a dynamic mass consumption economy. John Murphy, on the contrary, sees the notions of purchaser and citizen as contradictory in Australia in the late 1950s: if the good citizen was marked by responsibility and constraint, the consumer was ‘driven by gratification’.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, in countries such as the US and Australia, generations who had internalized notions of self-restraint and thrift at their mothers’ knees had to be convinced that spending was a necessary act and that hire purchase, or consumer credit, was not immoral. It is scarcely surprising that in this context teachers such as those involved in the Canoga Park case could be seen to be subversive in their lack of obvious enthusiasm for capitalism.

Women’s magazines played a significant role in educating women as consumers in the United States and in Australia.<sup>93</sup> It is not unexpected then that many college women sought employment in this

90 Lizabeth Cohen, *A consumers’ republic: the politics of mass consumption in America*, Vintage Books, New York, 2004, p. 8.

91 Ibid.

92 Murphy, *Imagining the fifties*, p. 188.

93 Susan Sheridan with Barbara Baird, Kate Borrett and Lyndall Ryan, *Who was that woman? The Australian Women’s Weekly in the postwar years*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2002.

field after graduation, as writers, editors and publishers, as we shall see. The centrality of growing consumption shaped the lives of many young college women, concerned with fashion, glamour and romance and the myriad ways of purchasing an enhanced, modern self. It also motivated the young college-educated wives, who desired the well-advertised consumer goods on offer for their homes and social status, and often joined the workforce in order to supply them. Glamour and domesticity combined to attract the increasingly younger wives who found a new independence from parental patterns as postwar economies turned to producing previously luxury goods en masse.

The young woman of the 1950s at Radcliffe College, for instance, was assumed by her student journal *The Radcliffe News* to be interested in fashion. In July 1950 she was advised to 'Be lovely, be comfortable in a Perma-Lift Girdle'. In October 1952 she was informed, 'Dior, Fath, Heim Favor straight skirt: lines stressed in Paris collections'. In March 1953 there was an entire fashion issue. In 1957 new students were advised to select their wardrobe 'with Utility, Space in mind. For arriving, departing, and attending the President's reception, a suit – with hat and gloves – is your best bet. Wear your high heeled pumps, by all means, but don't forget to bring a pair of flat-heeled ...' The March 1958 issue warned her that 'The chemise trend seems to be here to stay. Although the full sack dress is less common, it is still seen in a variety of summer-weight materials.' The sack did not marry well with hat and gloves: perhaps the fashion mood was changing. At the University of Texas (Austin) young women students posed as models for local dress shops. How relevant was this fashion advice for women attending less privileged colleges and universities? While it may have established the parameters for a few young women at elite colleges, others rebelled against such dress codes, creating the carefully crafted bohemian appearance of the art students, the barefooted defiance of the scholarship girls and the insouciant muu muus and sandals of girls in a Sydney summer. Not all students – or wives – were at the mercy of the advertisers, although commentators feared that they were. A sizable minority rebelled against the growing dominance of mass consumption.

The magazines that educated women to be consumers frequently reinforced traditional ideas of love, marriage and relations between men and women. Although they employed educated women, they were often ambivalent about women's education and professional life. Lyndall Ryan, about to start an arts degree at Sydney University in 1961, describes her love affair with the iconic magazine *The Australian Women's Weekly*. She enjoyed reading about the lives of TV and movie stars, the quizzes about marriage, the features on musicals such as *West Side Story* – as well as the advice columns, the fashion and the fiction.<sup>94</sup> Ryan was alarmed to find in February 1961 a featured story 'Do women really benefit from a university degree? Education a burden for women', by Maren Lidden, BA, LLB.<sup>95</sup> Lidden had received the 20-page questionnaire sent out to women graduates by Madge Dawson, one of the surveys I refer to throughout this book. The questionnaire clearly irritated Lidden: 'While attempting to answer all 84 questions honestly and dispassionately, it occurred to me out of the entire questionnaire a single question – the old but burning one still stands out "Do women really benefit from a university education?"'.<sup>96</sup> After informally surveying 18 women graduates herself she concluded that the answer was very often 'no'. Indeed some believed that it could prove a disadvantage, both before and after marriage. It was not an attraction to men, it could narrow the field of prospective husbands, male vanity would be offended by competition, and 'housework, boring afternoon teas and hit-and-giggle tennis' were dreary and stultifying to women who had enjoyed higher education before marriage. This discouraging article provoked a flurry of letters, most disagreeing with Lidden – and encouraging the young Lyndall Ryan as she began her studies.<sup>97</sup>

94 p. 63.

95 *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 8 February 1961, pp. 29, 31.

96 Lyndall Ryan, 'A turning point for the Weekly and a turning point for women? The debate about women and university' in *The Australian Women's Weekly* in 1961', *Journal of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies*, 6(1), 2001, p. 55.

97 Ibid.

## *Admass victims*

Were young people in burgeoning consumer societies the helpless victims of mass advertising and conformism? Max Harris wrote of Australian youth ‘whose international symbol is the espresso bar, whose mythic ideal is Elvis Presley, and whose cultural values, superficially at least, have been formed by impressions from outside their communities’.<sup>98</sup> Harris was concerned at the vast social conformity that characterized Australian youth. In this he was at one with noted American commentator David Riesman, who in the influential book *The lonely crowd: a study of the changing American character*<sup>99</sup> argued that Americans were developing a greater orientation to peer groups, becoming more ‘other directed’ rather than, as earlier, ‘inner directed’. John Kenneth Galbraith went further in his landmark book *The affluent society* in deriding private affluence, writing of ‘private opulence amid public squalor’.<sup>100</sup> This mass conformity was to be strongly resisted, as Adlai Stevenson had argued, and educated women could ensure their husbands and children were not caught up in it. They were to be individuals, yet individuals at the service of their families, a paradoxical and ultimately explosive mix.

## Sex and the college girl

In the early 1960s at the University of Melbourne my residential college allowed men to visit women students in their bedsits in the afternoons until 6 pm. The door of the room was to be left ajar so that a patrolling tutor could observe both student and guest. Further, if the

98 Max Harris, ‘Morals and manners’ in Peter Coleman (ed.), *Australian civilization*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1962, p. 54.

99 David Riesman, *The lonely crowd: a study of the changing American character*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1950.

100 John Kenneth Galbraith, cited in Cohen, *A consumers’ republic*, p. 10.

students did choose to sit on the bed, and there was often nowhere else to sit, they had to ensure that each had one foot on the floor, a fact that could be easily checked through the open door. In such a hothouse atmosphere, constantly policed, surges of youthful sexuality strained against the bonds of regulation. An atmosphere of the forbidden, the unspoken, the almost concealed typified the sexuality of the period. Only so much was allowed but no more. This had not changed since the early 1950s when a focus on restoring 'normality' after the disruptions of the war years predominated. However, as Beth Bailey points out, the hectic increase in rules by the late fifties and early sixties for university and college students was an indication of their increasing irrelevance.<sup>101</sup>

Both consumerism and the Cold War shaped 1950s sexuality. Above all sex was represented as heterosexual, monogamous and domestic, as many writers have pointed out. Marriage was the norm and the single state in some way deviant, possibly a sign of neurosis. Even as late as 1989 *The encyclopedia of marriage, divorce and the family* listed 'college education' alphabetically between 'coitus interruptus' and 'colostrum'. How could college education compete, bracketed between sex and breastfeeding? Against 'college education, impact on marriage and women' was the notation 'see spinster'.<sup>102</sup> Following these clues further we find, under 'spinster' the words 'a negative term used to refer to an unmarried woman'. To be a spinster then was not a desirable outcome even in 1989. It was not, however, as deviant as homosexuality, which was pathologized in the medical and political discourses of the time. In Australia, Joy Damousi argues, patriotism was all important. The patriot had a 'transparent' self and 'the tools of psychology' could be used 'to root out undesirable categories of people – the communist, the misfit, the homosexual, the egghead, the dupe'.<sup>103</sup> In Cold War America to be gay or lesbian was not only devi-

101 Bailey, *Sex in the heartland*.

102 Margaret DiCano, *The encyclopedia of marriage, divorce, and the family*, Facts on File, New York, 1989, p. 124.

103 Joy Damousi, *Freud in the antipodes: a cultural history of psychoanalysis in Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2005, p. 233.

ant but also possibly traitorous. Jane Rule, later a well-known Canadian lesbian writer, wrote of her student years:

When I was a student at Mills College, from 1948 to 1952, it was an offence to be sexual, never mind of what orientation. Men were not allowed in our rooms. Even the doors of the smaller living rooms were to be left open if we were entertaining men ...

Homosexuality was never mentioned, even by the visiting woman doctor enlisted specially to give us two lectures on sex, about which she confessed she was very embarrassed, but mainly she was there to inspire us to keep our virginity as our most precious gift to our husbands.<sup>104</sup>

Rule had been a student at Mills College in California at precisely the time when the [male] President Lynn White had famously written *Educating our daughters*, which ‘redefined the role of women’s education as socializing women for their rightful place in the home’.<sup>105</sup> Within that understanding elaborate regimes of regulation emerged that enabled young women in higher education both to find a husband and yet retain their ‘virginity’ for marriage, although it might only have been retained in the most technical sense. The preservation of virginity, of a girl’s market value, and the fear of unwanted pregnancy in those pre-Pill days, underpinned the vast structure of rules in women’s residences, as we have seen. Women themselves frequently administered the rules (see Chapter 1), acquiring leadership skills at the same time.

Students’ understandings of sexuality were shaped by the popular culture of the time. Many used the language of Freud. In 1953 Sylvia Plath describes her purchase of *The basic writings of Freud* as ‘a coveted book’.<sup>106</sup> Jill Ker bought the *Collected works* of Jung and put it on her bookshelf ‘to go back to again and again’.<sup>107</sup> Alice Gorton confided to her diary that she had been ‘Talking with mom about family and my

104 Jane Rule in *Mills Quarterly*, cited in Marilyn Schuster, *Passionate communities: reading resistance in Jane Rule’s fiction*, New York University Press, New York, 1999, p. 28.

105 Schuster, *Passionate communities*, p. 63.

106 Plath (ed.), *Letters home by Sylvia Plath*, p. 107.

107 Conway, *The road from Coorain*, p. 175.

psychological wounding at an early age & feelings of inferiority'. In a lengthy diary item she fantasized about a sexual and romantic future:

More plans about my future after accident with J. The disappearance, this time to a steel town. Work in a bar, love, violent of a real man (Streetcar named Desire type) of course after I got thin. Loss of baby. Then his passion, which I resist until his mom (my landlady) talks to me. Then the burning desire, which I actually physically painfully experienced just now. Thus violent terrible self obliterating ecstasy. Brutal yet unbelievably tender. Perfect wild animal happiness for two years. I continue to write successful salable stories. We live in steel town. The red sky, the sooted earth, sordid and real, primitive, yet wholly modern and intricate. No kids. He is killed a hero, I am completely desolate because of true love and great wanting, being wholly with him. His mother dies, I am alone, but well off financially (insurance, house, pension, authorship). I go to New York, apartment, beautiful clothes, a gorgeous desirable sensual satisfied wise and loving woman. Job on *New Yorker*, honored, respected, a literary light. I become a discreet, highly sought-after and desired prostitute also. Greatly loving in the Biblical sense too, with no begats, luckily. I can go on as soon as the light goes off, which it must. What a great life that would be.<sup>108</sup>

This fantasy is freighted with the sexuality and popular culture of the time, c. 1952. It also contains the ongoing concerns of an intelligent young woman, who wants to become a writer and to be slim – the desiderata of the time. College girls sought the desired job of editor/writer with the *New Yorker* or *Mademoiselle* even if few could emulate Plath's success. The protagonist in Gorton's piece seeks sexual union but also independence. She wants hot sex but no babies. The piece is redolent of Marlon Brando in *A streetcar named desire* (1951) and the heat and driving passion of working-class heroes.

As for many women of the time these views were filtered through the more popular works of authors such as Lundberg and Farnham, whose 1947 book, as we have seen, endorsed passivity for women – any assertive or feminist behaviour dismissed as leading to frigidity. It was a tricky balance for women: to find the right degree of sexual responsiveness between the undesirable poles of frigidity on the one hand and nymphomania on the other. Alfred Kinsey's path-breaking

108 Journal of Alice Gorton Hart, 1952, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

report *Sexual behavior in the human female* was not published until 1953. Its pages offered women a totally different sexuality, which terrified opponents claimed was a threat to American womanhood, an ‘indictment of American women’. Kinsey’s research suggested that 90 per cent of women engaged in sexual petting, 62 per cent had masturbated, 50 per cent of women had engaged in premarital intercourse, 13 per cent had had at least one homosexual contact and 26 per cent had even engaged in extramarital intercourse. These figures directly challenged the idea of ‘deep passivity’ in women’s sexual lives.

The publication of Kinsey’s work and its predecessor *Sexual behavior in the human male* underlines the link between Cold War thinking and sexuality. In 1953 Kinsey and his funders, the Rockefeller Foundation, were investigated by a committee of the US House of Representatives chaired by Tennessee congressman B. Carroll Reece for possible links to the Communist Party. Although Kinsey was not charged with any offence his Rockefeller Foundation funding was terminated.

### *Trying to live a free life in an unfree world*

Attitudes to sexuality in 1950s and early 1960s Australia were the subject of comments made by several (male) contributors to a symposium on Australian civilization.<sup>109</sup> This volume sums up the period in its total neglect of women except as subjects of occasional – and derisory – interest. Douglas McCallum, for instance, noted that amatory activity in Australia had never been studied with the clinical care devoted to the subject by Kinsey. Romantic love, he declared, except as purveyed by Hollywood or European films, was at a discount. Summing up, he saw Australian sexual mores as ‘puritanical, authoritarian, monogamous and anti-hedonistic’. Doctrines of free love were firmly repelled and an ambiguous ‘double standard’ applied to men as distinct to women. Only a minority of intellectuals, he concluded, ‘car-

109 Coleman, *Australian civilization*.

ried on an unremitting struggle against sexual intolerance and the mean-spirited ethic that goes with it'.<sup>110</sup>

That intellectual minority came spectacularly to public attention in two defining scandals – and well-publicized court cases – of the period: the dismissal of Professor Sydney Sparks Orr from the University of Tasmania for the seduction of a student in 1956, and the mystifying Chandler/Bogle deaths of early 1963, both referred to above. Both events had links to the Sydney 'Push', a group of libertarians and anarchists who advocated a compelling mix of sexual permissiveness and radicalism in the period.<sup>111</sup> This group of men and women met regularly in various inner-city Sydney pubs over two decades for intellectual discussion, in an atmosphere of convivial drinking and a degree of sexual activity remarkable for the time. Push members believed in free love, the rejection of social rules, and in equality between men and women in relation to sexual desire. It was a qualified equality, however, as Ann Coombs notes in her book on the Push. 'Women were men's equals if they could play by the men's rules', she relates.<sup>112</sup> The difficulty was that few could.

Many women flourished in the intellectual atmosphere, the sexual freedom and the experience they gained in this free-wheeling group, radical in its approach to sex in a pre-Pill era. Ann Coombs suggests the way a woman could make her mark: 'One way ... was to be outrageous. A very clever tongue, extravagant behaviour or spectacular promiscuity could ensure a place in the pantheon of Push heroines.'<sup>113</sup> It is not surprising then that the young Germaine Greer, newly arrived in Sydney from Melbourne, fell in love with the Push. 'I found what I did not know I was looking for', she told a Radio 4 interview, 'seriousness and scruple, in the service of the truth'.<sup>114</sup> Others found the rejection of fidelity and the emphasis on a male standard of sexual pleasure difficult to deal with. As Coombs explains, 'it was always

110 Douglas McCallum, 'The state of liberty' in Coleman, *Australian civilization*, p. 39.

111 Coombs, *Sex and anarchy*.

112 p. 77.

113 p. 70.

114 p. 111. Germaine Greer, 'The strongest influence on my life', Radio 4, 28 May 1975.

women's 'frigidity' that was the cause of unsatisfactory sex, not men's inadequate performance'.<sup>115</sup> And no-one wanted to count the costs: the pregnancies, the inability to deal with jealousy, the opportunities forgone and careers delayed. Before women's liberation and the development of a language to express women's particular needs some women felt frustration and rejection from such an exciting yet puzzling group. Others disdained their double standards. Jill Ker liked their ideas but felt that 'their intellectual originality went along with a stultifying conformity to what were considered "advanced" sexual mores'. 'Everyone regarded marriage and monogamy as bourgeois conventions, and it was more or less *de rigueur* to join in the sexual couplings of the group to share its intellectual life', she observed. She judged this the standard Australian left view of women, one that was decidedly asymmetrical in relation to sexual liberation.<sup>116</sup>

Push women were different – and could recognize each other by the duffle coats, long hair and black apparel of the time. Ker noted wryly that as they had rejected bourgeois fashion they often appeared rather drab. From this group several leaders of the feminist movement emerged. It was, as Push regular (and now social commentator) Eva Cox recalls,

a much better jumping off point than marriage and suburbia. And the women who tried to jump off from marriage and suburbia had a lot more ground to make up. It [the Push] put women in a good position to do something different when the opportunities came up. Disproportionately really, because an awful lot of women came out of the Push and into political activism.<sup>117</sup>

Given their approach to sexual freedom it was not surprising that some members of the Push defended Professor Sydney Sparks Orr when he was dismissed from his university post as Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tasmania. Orr, an exponent of progressive ideas such as free love, and an enemy of conventional morality, had conducted an affair with a female student. Although the affair ap-

115 Coombs, *Sex and anarchy*, p. 78.

116 Conway, *The road from Coorain*, p. 221.

117 Coombs, *Sex and anarchy*, p. 304.

peared to be consensual the professor was deemed to have taken advantage of a young and vulnerable student, exposing her to views that directly affronted the repressed and parochial Tasmanian society. In such a climate this was seen as grounds for dismissal. The libertarians of the Push were not happy that Orr denied the charges of seduction instead of proclaiming them and striking a blow against convention.

Far more devastating was the mystery of the Bogle/Chandler case, a case which to this day has not been solved, although a plausible theory has recently been put forward.<sup>118</sup> Geoffrey Chandler, the husband of the murdered woman, Margaret Chandler, had left the fateful party for a gathering of the Push. This window into the accepted sexual behaviour of some highly educated groups came as a shock to middle-class Australia and was a portent of what was to become broadly proclaimed in the decades ahead, the right to sexual freedom. It belies the comments of Max Harris in *Australian civilization* that ‘the sexual act is usually considered a fairly binding commitment to marriage’. ‘Casual sexuality is not as mandatory as it is in America’, Harris argued, ‘not as a result of religious training or moral scruples ... but because casual sex indicates a “skirt-chaser”, and the skirt-chaser is considered something of a ratbag, a weirdo, a solitary’ – all pretty nasty things to be in early 1960s Australia.<sup>119</sup> Deriding the youth who proclaimed his interests in girls as a ‘crumb’ Harris noted, nevertheless, that ‘the poofter is the lowest form of life’.<sup>120</sup>

Harris’s comments suggest a derisory dismissal of homosexuality among Australian society at the time, negating the very real dangers for those suspected of unacceptable behaviour. Far more sinister anxieties underlay any suspicion of deviation from the heterosexual norm. In California in 1954 Jane Rule, recent Mills graduate and coming to terms with her lesbianism, was uncomfortable with the atmos-

118 Peter Butt, ‘Who killed Dr Bogle and Mrs Chandler?’ ABC TV, 7 September 2006. The new theory suggested controversially that a highly toxic gas emanating from the polluted river may have been involved.

119 Harris, ‘Morals and manners’, p. 60.

120 Ibid.

phere of McCarthyism in even relaxed middle-class surroundings.<sup>121</sup> As Marilyn Schuster recounts in her exegesis of Rule's essay 'The 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1954', 'Rule quickly understood the slippage between "homosexual" and "communist" in McCarthy's understanding of "subversive", and realized that just as she was preparing for her first teaching job, schools would be under close surveillance, and McCarthy's "activities gave a national focus to my personal discomforts"'. This was to be a defining moment for Rule who later wrote: 'I left the country ...'.<sup>122</sup>

Here, before the slogan had become a catch cry, the personal was undoubtedly the political.

### *Psychoanalysis and other therapeutic solutions*

Based on Freudian understandings of sexuality, psychological and psychoanalytical therapies were brought to bear on a range of social 'problems' afflicting women. They were part of the armoury of adjustment considered so important at the time. The notion of therapy became so much part of the life of highly educated women that it appeared routinely in several surveys of the time. In Betty Friedan's survey of her Smith College classmates, which famously informed her book *The feminine mystique*, the question was posed: 'Have you had psychotherapy? Your husband or children? Do you feel you need it? If need, but haven't had, why not?'<sup>123</sup> Many replied that they had, or, if not, that they felt they would benefit from psychotherapy but were inhibited by the expense.

In Baruch and Barnett's survey of women in the middle years the question 'Have you ever had a nervous breakdown?' was posed. This too elicited a surprising number of positive responses and was certainly seen as entirely appropriate by the respondents.

121 Schuster, *Passionate communities*, p. 53.

122 Rule, cited in Schuster, *ibid.*

123 Betty Goldstein Friedan papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University.

Another loving mother and journal writer agonized over her daughters' futures. An interesting diary entry concerns her older daughter studying at Columbia, not sure of what she wanted to do in life, of 'what her objective honestly was'. The solution encouraged by her parents is a typically fifties one: 'October 1958. All this indicated she should not try to go on as before and that she needed psychoanalysis first.' This was duly arranged – five days a week.

On 5 October 1959 the concerned mother was worried about her daughter's expensive psychoanalysis, a drain on the family finances, as she also worried about her younger daughter's unmarried state:

It's hard to believe that she has a hard core of inner neurosis that is so different from the tangle of motives and instincts existing in any young person of high calibre facing the world with some wounds from previous mistakes. Like other mothers I suppose I lean on the prescription of a happy marriage and suitable employment.<sup>124</sup>

The linking of a happy marriage and suitable employment was prescient. Happy marriage alone was not enough for many highly educated women as we shall see – and as Betty Friedan revealed. Shelby Moorman Howatt, writing for her twentieth Smith College reunion, reflected that after college she had abdicated responsibility for plotting her own life, 'mindlessly following the Very Easy Simplicity Pattern for good girls, circa 1958'. The pattern included marriage to 'an intelligent successful man', two children and multiple voluntary activities. Ten years later she noted that her reflections on her deep dissatisfaction, spurred by reading Friedan and Greer, led to two more children in an attempt to quieten her inner anxieties. It also led to an eventual visit to a psychotherapist:

I told the psychotherapist I finally consulted that I had no idea why I had sought his help. Four healthy kids, a reasonably happy marriage, a decent home ... I was even sneaking in some graduate school between dentists and diapers. It was

124 Dorothy Smith Dushkin papers 1906–88, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

all very embarrassing, whining in the face of such richness. And then I saturated every tissue in the considerably placed box.<sup>125</sup>

Moorman Howatt claims she was not alone in her misery. ‘Almost one third of us [her class of 1958] reportedly seriously considered suicide in the late sixties’. The women’s movement and Friedan’s famous revelation of ‘the problem that has no name’ came just in time for the class of ’58. While Howatt’s reflections and the statistically unsound samples of campus reunion books cannot be considered a reliable estimate, there is no doubt that the recourse to psychotherapy was a common one for conflicted highly educated women in the US.

The clearest example of the need for and experience of psychotherapy has become almost iconic for later generations of feminists through Sylvia Plath’s life and work. In *The bell jar* Plath fictionalized her own breakdown while working in the much desired job as guest editor for *Mademoiselle*. Plath noted wryly, ‘A psychiatrist is the God of our age’.<sup>126</sup>

Not all women accepted the psychoanalytic models of the time. Australians in general were wary of psychoanalysis. Although, as Jill Ker noted, medical fashion in the 1950s decreed giving troubled middle-aged women such as her mother tranquillizers and sedatives, she disagreed with Plath on psychiatry’s reach. Ker considered psychiatry in the Sydney of her day ‘the recourse of weaklings and emotional cripples’.<sup>127</sup> Older women in particular repudiated fashionable models as narrow and restrictive. Edna Roper, an Australian Labor Party parliamentarian, was critical of Helen Deutsch’s argument that ‘sex is the common denominator to which all women’s activities can be reduced’.<sup>128</sup> She saw the dangers for highly educated women of accepting a model of sexuality that validated feminine masochism:

125 Howatt, ‘Straddling two worlds (or) thank god we knew how to post’.

126 Karen V. Kukil (ed.), *The unabridged journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950–1962*, Anchor Books, New York, 2000, p. 151.

127 Conway, *The road from Coorain*, p. 175.

128 Damousi, *Freud in the antipodes*, p. 246.

Hidden away in the clinically repulsive language is the definitive suggestion that many women, ‘prominent because of their initiative and indefatigable efforts, who have made valuable contributions to the welfare of mankind because of their will and energy’ are not normal sexually. *As such conceptions have a currency in academic circles, it is not surprising that so few University women are prepared to join in the struggle for female emancipation.*<sup>129</sup>

Shaped by the Cold War and its anxieties, the consumer ‘admass’ society advancing at a rapid rate, and a psychoanalytically based re-thinking of sexual and marital behaviour, young highly educated women of the 1950s and early 1960s were facing turbulent times. How were those defining features to be played out in the lives of women students? They were clearly in for an interesting ride.

129 p. 246, original emphasis.



### 3 The experience: peer culture or academics?

Oh you can't get a man with your brains.<sup>1</sup>

The Melbourne History Department was my Paris.<sup>2</sup>

We were the most remarkably silent generation of students who ever attended an institution of higher learning during a turbulent period in American History.<sup>3</sup>

What did it feel like to be a student in the 1950s? Letters home, some surprisingly frank, are revealing. So are interviews – although their retrospective nature offers a different, more filtered, view. Were intellectual concerns uppermost? Or did youthful preoccupations with the need for sexual attractiveness, for romance, predominate? Was getting a man all important? Was it really the most silent generation? Helen Horowitz has argued that for most American college students from the late eighteenth century to the 1970s, a campus peer system, organized in opposition to the academic values of the faculty, has dominated student life. Horowitz identifies several themes: a strict social distance between teachers and students; a devaluation of academic work; a peer culture definition of a 'reasonable' amount of work and a valuation of athletics and social graces. When women became numerous on campuses, she argues, an emphasis on 'style' (physical appearance, dress, walk) and sexual play was added. Horowitz dates the decline of this peer culture from the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Pockets of it however, remain. In *Educated in romance* Dorothy Holland and Margaret Eisenhart argued that peer pressure for sexual allure was still all important to young

1 Smith College song c. 1950.

2 Inga Clendinnen, transcript of interview for Australian Biography Project, Tape 4 of 13, p. 2.

3 Shelby Moorman Howatt, 'Straddling two worlds (or) thank god we knew how to post'.

4 Horowitz, *Campus life*, cited in Holland and Eisenhart, *Educated in romance*, pp. 81–82.

southern US women in the early 1980s and indirectly important in eroding their career identities.<sup>5</sup> Nor has that pressure eased. In large southern universities in the 1990s, ‘time honoured gender standards are upheld and celebrated’, Elizabeth Boyd claimed: the Southern Lady is briefly resurrected through rituals of sorority rush.<sup>6</sup>

However, the strength of the student culture clearly varied with individuals and settings. And, as Horowitz pointed out, there were exceptions. Some retained serious academic interests, remaining ‘within their parents’ cultures’ throughout college, seeking approval from teachers rather than peers. Others, perhaps more cynical, tended to drop out of college culture, becoming ‘rebels’, a group who did not predominate until the 60s. Some tried, precariously, to balance both campus culture and serious ambition. Sylvia Plath, newly arrived at Smith College was so happy. ‘I keep muttering, “I’M A SMITH GIRL NOW”’, she wrote to her mother in her first weeks away. Her aim was ‘to unobtrusively do well in all my courses and get enough sleep’.<sup>7</sup>

In Australian universities women rarely lived on campus and were thus exempt from a full-blown version of student culture. On the whole though there were two tasks for women: to gain an education and to develop the desired image of an attractive woman, ready for early marriage. The first Carolyn Heilbrun calls a quest plot, far better suited to male lives: the second the romance plot.<sup>8</sup> Women, it appeared, in this period needed both plots: quest and romance. But how did they fit together? And did the ambition to do well have to be unobtrusive, as Plath intuitively realized?

5 p. 85.

6 Elizabeth Boyd, ‘Sister act: sorority rush as feminine performance’, *Southern Culture*, Fall 1999, p. 58.

7 Plath, *Letters home by Sylvia Plath*, p. 48.

8 Heilbrun, *Writing a woman’s life*.

## Quest and romance

Youth, appearance, acquiescence and domesticity were the desired virtues of the young woman of the period. 'She was to be young, beautiful and ardent on demand' and to desire a happy domestic life.<sup>9</sup> Here a series of extracts from another young college woman, writing letters home in her first (freshman) year, raise many of the dominant themes of the time:

9/29/49 What caused the most excitement among us freshman was not the meeting [with class dean] but the droves of Amherst boys who came over and collected around Sage. They came to look us over, I guess, but we did our share of looking over too.

October 1949 I noticed that all the girls seemed to know the Amherst, Yale, Williams, Dartmouth and Harvard songs better than the Smith ones.

I got back from that date at 2 minutes to 1.00 (late limit) and what a mob! Over half the house, plus their dates, were there.

Mrs Cook, the warden, gave a very good talk to the freshmen this evening. It was mostly on drinking, necking, sex and the like.

10/31/49 I told Nanna that it would be the usual Saturday night at Amherst: beer, singing, beer, dancing and beer. So that I wouldn't alarm her I left out what it is that they spend the most time on – sex, sex, sex. The two other boys I've been out with have been very nice and not at all wolfish but I couldn't expect my luck to last forever.

I don't drink or smoke and when I refused to neck I was sure Harry thought I was a terrible prude and he probably did. Being nice, he wasn't a stinker about it and started playing big brother to me. I tried desperately to think of things to talk about and did succeed in asking him some questions that kept him talking for a long time. It was all very hard as the other couples in the room were all making passionate love. When I finally got home I had a long, long talk with [a friend] and my morale was considerably lifted.

9 Patricia Albjerg Graham, 'The cult of true womanhood', p. 403.

... and from now on I won't be the nervous, self-conscious freshman type. If he asks me if I want something to drink I'll say, 'Yes, I'll have some ginger ale' and look him straight in the eye.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time this young woman was developing wider horizons than keeping wolfish boyfriends at bay: concerns with global issues and a growing engagement with ideas appear:

June 4 1950 [discussing honorary degrees given to alumnae]: Symbolically I think (and intentionally I'm sure) the degrees were given to 2 Jews, one of them prominent in Jewish affairs, a prominent Protestant, a Catholic nun, a Negro doctor, and other women in widely separated fields, standing for different beliefs, professions [sic] and peoples. I was very proud indeed of Smith, because it really does stand for that universal spirit.

10/8/50 Pysch[ology] and sociol[ogy] are too new. Psych has had its Galileo in Freud but as yet has had no Newton. In another 30, 40, or 50 years they may really be able to say something. By that time they will spend less time justifying themselves in a defensive way ... It's really wonderful to be in a house where kids are aware of things and aren't afraid to think and talk about them.

In her second year this engaging student was far more mature, talking less of dates and more of a female world, as well as her need to do more part-time work, such as cleaning, babysitting, delivering newspapers and waiting at alumnae functions. She was more assured about her relations with young men, and setting her own limits. She was also developing further that strong sense of the world and of social justice. A student at an elite liberal arts college, she was influenced by a peer culture that included a strong academic tradition.

11/3/50 Went out with a senior from Worcester Polytechnic who was not good looking but awfully nice and very interesting. He completely relieved me of the responsibility of making-remarks + starting conversation-without-appearing obvious without being a boring jabbermouth ... He went on an USA industrial tour of 6 countries and his impressions were very interesting.

11/26/50 House dance last night was very nice but too dull, I guess, because of Miss Rae – I guess she expected all of her guhls to maintain her standards of

10 Dorothy Smith Dushkin papers 1906–88, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

Victorian prudery. One of the sophomores got pinned by an awfully nice Cornell man. About 1 or 2 am he returned to the house with his best friend, stood outside under her window ... and serenaded her. The whole side of the house heard them sing the Sweetheart of Sigma Chi etc and it was so pretty nobody had the heart to tell them to stop.

3/24/51 Lore D., one of the seniors in the house, got married last Wednesday, an hour and a half after spring vacation began, and is now Mrs James Cochrane. She's the second one to get married this year ... I really must hand it to Lore. She handled all the wedding preparations herself in addition to writing a 140 page thesis on 'An evaluation of Industrial Sociology'. Lore's the one who could do it though. Not only has she been engaged to Jimmy for the last three years, but she's a junior phi-beta, president of Dance Group, and Vice-president of the senior class.

I really do want to honor [i.e. choose the more demanding honours program]. Even if it restricts me in some ways I think it would be worth it to really get into something and stop skimming over the surface all the time.

4/15/51 I have a feeling that in a few years there will not be house mothers. They don't have them at Holyoke – just grad students, etc who plan meals and order food ... All we need is a housekeeper, not a housemother ... We're not babies and we shouldn't be treated as such.

This ambitious young woman clearly enjoyed the intellectual stretching that taking honours in philosophy, her chosen subject, represented. While noting the early engagements and marriages of her peers she was seeking academic goals. She also resented the close surveillance of a housemother.

'4/18/51 So happy that I'd decided to take honors', she wrote, but at the same time her letters talked of the 'avoidrupois battle', that constant worry of so many students then and now of putting on weight.

We gain a very different perspective on this student's abilities from her mother who wrote extensive diary entries about her children. D. was so proud of her daughter and, like mothers everywhere, worried about her future. Her concern also alluded to one particular aspect of peer culture – the concern with appearance and the need to attract a mate.

Oct 13, 52 A is managing the college campus campaign for [Adlai] Stevenson ... It is a lively antidote to her scholar's thesis for special honors in philosophy. What with cello lessons, the orchestra and the Glee club she has a well rounded life.

[Of A] she's all on fire about working for democracy in the orient – especially India ... It's possible she could get a Fulbright to India another year, if she wants to hard enough.

August 10, 53 [A's graduation] At a previous chapel service she was awarded the Lamont Gold medal for excellence in philosophy. At the last chapel she was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and designated to graduate *Magna cum laude* – All of this made us proud parents and also she played a solo cello piece with the orchestra at the concert. It was gratifying to see [A's sister] on one side as concertmistress and A on the other as principal cello. Also to see A singing with gusto in the Glee Club concert. Her education has been well-rounded and very much suited to her needs and abilities. She feels she has had excellent instruction and we are happy in the knowledge that what she has learned is not superficial, smug or insignificant. It has definitely exercised her mind, shown her intellectual capacities and more important sharpened her zest for a full life. Her social conscience is large and anxious to be tested, her desire to be of use strong and ambitious.

With it all she frankly wants to get married and hopes to meet a congenial mate before too long. Commencement was a very pleasant interlude – even [D's husband] who expected to be bored was surprised into great susceptibility to the charms of Smith. The music was well done, the girls pretty and alluring, the ceremonies not too sentimental to lose appeal and the actual graduation impressive. Weather was perfect and the quad setting is truly lovely.

This concerned mother's diary reveals glimpses of her daughter's postgraduate years as well as reflecting on her own life as a highly educated and sensitive wife and mother of the fifties:

Nov 29, 53 [after thanksgiving] There's too much food preparation and dishwashing to make full family care a pleasure without outside help.

[of A writing from Beirut/India] her letters are full of descriptions of all sorts of people whom, in her characteristic way, she makes friends of and enrich her knowledge of types, nationalities and all sorts of foreign customs and conditions – an ideal education for anyone interested in foreign service.

May 54 A dieting in earnest – she must lose another 30 pounds however.

May 15 A has come back from a trip to Philadelphia where she looked over her prospects for next year at Penn Univ ... She found many graduate students living in co-op houses – consumer co-op enterprises for men and women of that age – arranged for mutual benefits financial and social. I'm glad she can escape the girls' dormitory life and have fun with both sexes in a natural-sharing basis. She listened

in to a seminar where the ambassador from Pakistan happened to be speaking and had interviews with the heads of department of South Asian Studies.

Our financial burden will be heavy next year but our minds will be easy about the happiness of the children in their schools.

Oct 15 A's letters are happy – likes her studies and is studying cello – paying for lessons with money from a part-time job. She enjoys her independence in living conditions – the camaraderie among the co-op house inmates ...

June 27, 1955 A has taken an apartment with a friend from the co-op ... She found the co-op too noisy, too social and too time-consuming. Her work is progressing under teachers she enjoys more and I hope she will find the field she wants to enter as a career so she is no longer smitten with lack of confidence in her abilities.<sup>11</sup>

A's parents ran a music summer school in their Vermont home. She wrote after a reunion of summer school counsellors – including her own children.

To hear the glorious Monteverdi madrigals ring out and the staunch beauty of Bach chorales with young and true voices, emphasized the spirit of soul-shared music as instrumental playing cannot do ... Nothing cheap and egotistical will ever satisfy them after such experiences and I'm grateful to have them occur at Kinhaven.

That observation rang true for A, who wrote earlier of her dissatisfaction with 'skimming over the surface'.

March 3, 56 There is still a question whether she can get her MA thesis in by May 7 – which is a deadline for a June degree ... She has lost some weight, her face is becoming thinner, her complexion clearer and she has a more collected and poised air about her. She has grown up and I think is more aware of her femininity.

Sept 27, 56 A has finished a paper on 'Labor relations in Bengal' and goes back to Philadelphia to write her MA thesis on 'Indian Congress attitude toward Untouchables' for which she expects to get her degree in February ... All the potential building up in [her] must have an out sooner or later.

11 Dushkin papers 1906–88, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

Oct 58 [A is working in Washington but on Hungary, not South Asia] Her new very slim figure is giving her more assurance too. Like all mothers I hope she'll find a good husband.

A ... is only too ready to find a mate, but actually has none of the hunting technique prevalent among the contemporaries in the same state ... There's no question in my mind that whatever tangles exist in her would dissolve easily with a suitable marriage ...

The futility of my wishful brooding is manifest – mothers can't arrange things – but I can't stop reverting to it.

At this point hypnotherapy was recommended to help fight A's 'obesity'.

Dec 13, 59 Card from A saying Dr Brown at Penn U had not only offered her free tuition for 3 courses second semester but \$100 a month towards living expenses. This is a boost and will restore morale and confidence with or without getting the Fulbright grant ... I hope she will have made some progress with weight control before then also so she can start the return to her chosen field with all sails unfurled.

## With all sails unfurled

With this wonderful image we take leave of this young diary writer and her mother and turn to others. She had escaped the early college marriage, had completed a Masters degree and was looking for meaningful work. What did it take to unfurl the sails – to give young women a strong sense of themselves as they headed into the turbulent waters of life outside universities and colleges? For many the conflict between the quest and the romance plots dominated. Sylvia Plath balanced that tight-rope, for a time at least, by seeking intelligent young men who shared her interests. Describing a date in her freshman year she wrote:

We sat and talked out in the cool dark of the steps, and I told him how I felt about being at ease. Seems he felt the same way. So we went home at 12.30 with the others, and I felt very happy. To think that I didn't have to torture myself by

sitting in a smoke-filled room with a painted party smile, watching my date get drunk!<sup>12</sup>

A's concern (and that of her mother) with weight and appearance was not unusual. Nancy Hunter Steiner describes the stereotypical American college girl of the time in these terms: 'If possible she was bony, angular and flat chested. If not, she devoted a portion of her limitless energy to achieving the ideal: an understated, studied informality that suggested warmth and approachability'.<sup>13</sup> There was much work to be put into self-presentation and the skills of dating. Another young college student, eighteen years old and a contemporary of the diary writer, wrote:

Here I sit, looking rather beautiful if I do say so myself, nail polish, mom's dress, cigarette – rather fancy – waiting for Lee ... Tremendous time tonight – Dixie, dancing talking and loving, but no drink at all! I was very happy about that ... I am quite pretty now with eyes and planes in my face.

It's quite hard to analyse a party, but I do know that: (1) by trying hard, in conversation etc, you can help tremendously (This I did conscientiously) & (2) By mutual affection a date is enhanced no end.

I'm learning quite a bit about this subtle aggressive physical flirting. Progressed to the hand-a-bit-under-dress-collar stage. He has great technique: I liked it.

Ideal life: to be thin and quite beautiful of course. Sept 22 – hit 130 [lbs?] (holding on) today and overjoyed by the reception ... Thank God for the filthy weed! It may indirectly change my life by helping me diet.

If I can loose 15 pounds and make good grades and snare some men I may confront father at Christmas time with an accomplished perfection.

'STUDY, SAVE, STARVE From now on it is all completely up to me', she confided to her diary. And to strengthen the point: 'Food is the enemy'.<sup>14</sup>

This young woman knew exactly the nature of the task: to get good grades *and* to snare a man.

12 Plath, *Letters home by Sylvia Plath*, p. 50.

13 Steiner, *A closer look at Ariel*, p. 11.

14 Journal of Alice Gorton Hart, 1952, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

*The filthy weed*

The ‘filthy weed’, support of dieters then and now, was strongly promoted in campus magazines in the United States. It seemed as natural a part of student life as pizza. ‘Just lighting up a Salem’, one reminisced, summoning up her younger persona. Gloria Steinem, packing for a junior year abroad, received the following instructions in the advice given by the college on budgeting requirements.

SMOKING:

Cigarette expenses: As of September 1952, a pack of US cigarettes cost from 180 to 200 francs or about 40 cents in Paris; French blond cigarettes cost 120 to 140 francs a pack, Gauloises, 80 francs.<sup>15</sup>

*The Radcliffe News* offers tantalizing glimpses into women students’ lives. We can assume, for instance, that many of the young women on US campuses were smokers. In February 1958 an official announcement was made allowing smoking in the dormitory rooms ‘as of next fall ... Smoking in the rooms will be allowed but the rules forbidding smoking in bed will be strictly enforced from all indications’.<sup>16</sup> Large advertisements in *The Radcliffe News* assured students that it was not only chic to smoke but it was safe. ‘My cigarette? Camels of course!’ one claimed, featuring a glamorous model in formal dress and jewelry. ‘Yes, Camels are SO MILD’ claimed another ad,

that in a coast-to-coast test of hundreds of men and women who smoked camels – and only Camels – for 30 consecutive days, noted throat specialists, making weekly examinations, reported **NOT ONE SINGLE CASE OF THROAT IRRITATION DUE TO SMOKING CAMELS!**<sup>17</sup>

Many ads featured movie stars, others male and female college students in glamorous pairs. Here campus culture strongly meshed with consumer culture.

15 Gloria Steinem papers, Series 1, Education, Box 5, biographical material, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

16 7 February 1958.

17 *The Radcliffe News*, Commencement 1950, p. 7.

The pervasiveness of smoking insinuated itself into the poetic imagery of a young student writing home from her year abroad. She wrote from Provence in 1956: 'The sky is a wide bowl of sapphire blue: pure and crystal clear – delicately etched clouds, like the haze of cigarette smoke, float across the zenith high above and swallows dive like jets throughout'.<sup>18</sup>

## Everyone was very idealistic

Some of those same preoccupations shaped the life of students at Australian co-educational universities. But many also look back on their university days as tremendous fun. Freed from the urgency of having to build a career, women revelled in education for its own sake and the joy of independence. Ideals were high after the horrors of war.

Starting a degree in commerce as a full-time student in 1945 Mary Goldsmith<sup>19</sup> dropped to part-time study a year later, working in an office to support herself. She married in 1949, finishing her arts degree in another state in 1950. Mary loved her university days: it was an exciting period with many ex-servicemen on campus.

Mary: I liked it. It was just wonderful.

Q: What sort of clubs were you interested in?

Mary: Depends on the boyfriends. I had lots of boyfriends. And I was encouraged to join the Labor club, which I did. And I was very interested in music because I play the piano. So mostly the Labor Club and going away for ... club conferences and the music. Going to concerts and that sort of thing. Politics.

Asked about the campus leading lights Mary mentioned Stephen Murray-Smith, Geoff Searle, Ian Turner and others, all later to become well-known Australian intellectuals.

18 Anne Rittershofer Neumann papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

19 Not her real name.

Mary: Everyone was very idealistic, there is no doubt about that ... Everyone thought they were going to fix things up.

Q: It must have been a very lively time.

Mary: It was. Yes, it was good. It was terrific in fact.<sup>20</sup>

### Another said of her Melbourne University years:

I absolutely adored it. I just adored it. I could have stayed there forever. I got wrapped up in theatre ... they were glamorous and exciting people. Barry Humphries was one. I was involved in the theatre.

Q: A good social life?

A: I suppose it was but I was a bit petrified. The boys tended to be a bit patronizing. I was in the commerce students' society. Goodness knows why ... I was having a wonderful time. As I said, I could have stayed there the rest of my life.

This scholarship student came from a working-class family with little formal education. Encouragement from teachers in the state schools she had attended was critical. On campus she mixed with privileged students who had attended private schools:

Q: You say you actually came from a rather different social background than some of the others? Was there a sense of distinction?

A: I would say it was a melting pot. I never really felt any different. I remember my friends were from private schools.

Q: But that did not seem to matter at all?

A: No, it didn't.<sup>21</sup>

20 Interview with Melbourne University graduate for 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

21 Interview for 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

## Unseemly times

Another young woman did note social distinctions at Janet Clarke Hall, the Anglican hall of residence for women at the University of Melbourne. These halls were the closest Australian equivalent to the women's liberal arts colleges of the US, providing a woman-centred living environment. Once outside the doors of the college, however, women attended classes (and clubs) with men.

And then you see I was in Janet Clarke Hall, which was absolutely marvellous because I was away from home for the first time. I was living in a university college with highly intelligent women. Most of whom were not feminists. Women's College [another residential college] is a feminist college. It was called University College then. They protested and they marched down the street. They belonged to the university ... evangelical union. They belonged to the Labor party [the progressive party]. The Janet Clarke Hall ... were ladies, would you mind. I will tell you a funny story because it illustrates it very well. Miss Joske was the principal at Janet Clarke Hall when I went there. And the rules were very, very strong. She preferred us to go out with Trinity gentlemen. [Trinity was the 'brother' Anglican college for men.] Nobody from anywhere else. And if you got your leave pass and said he was from Trinity there were no questions asked. But if you said he was from somewhere else there were lots of questions asked.

And eventually years later ... I went back to a Janet Clarke Hall reunion. And I had two small boys with me. And Miss Joske was very deaf. 'Oh yes, I remember you. You're the one who married an Ormond man aren't you?' [Ormond was the Presbyterian college.] And that summed it up.

Asked how she got together with her 'Ormond man' the woman recalls:

I don't remember that bit ... The engineers used to walk across the back of Trinity. And we used to go along that path ... to the university. And I think I more or less ran into him. One of my children asked me recently how I met Dad. And I said all I remember is that I spent a lot of time with him. It's interesting because we were not allowed into Ormond College. They were all single sex [men's colleges]. You could go into Trinity any time you liked but you could not go into Ormond or Queens or Newman.

Every night everybody walked. You would come out of college, when the Ormond clock struck ten you would come out and meet the fellow ... and you

would go for a walk. Around the Circle. But you had to be back because the doors were locked at half past ten.

Q: You think that's a fifties courtship?

A: Yep. [her granddaughter had asked 'Did you sleep with Pa before you married him?'] And I said it wasn't easy on a tram or up a fire escape. But that was the reality. Nobody had cars.<sup>22</sup>

This perhaps is a difference. In the more affluent America of the times more students, particularly young men, owned cars.

This young Janet Clarke Hall student also enjoyed student life in the early 1950s. She felt strongly about Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies' attempts to ban the Communist Party and, against her father's will, marched in protest. Her school headmistress had admonished her earlier: "Hermitage girls do not behave in an unseemly manner and if you wish to remain in this school you will never again behave in an unseemly manner." I've been unseemly ever since. They were lovely phrases weren't they?

We had marvellous political clubs at Melbourne University in those days. And you went to all of them. And we had marvellous societies ... the Newman society which was a very strong Catholic society ... and the SCM, the student Christian evangelical society. I didn't approve of them terribly. It was much more exciting at the Newman Society, not that I'm a Roman Catholic. We all had strong ideas, we were strong-minded people. There were some very good debaters.

But at Janet Clarke Hall we were very proper ladies. You married properly, you went out with the right sort of people. I remember when Fiona X ... became engaged to David Y. She had the most glorious emerald and diamond ring that we all coveted.<sup>23</sup>

It was not only the Smith College students who hoped for 'a ring by spring'.

June Factor confirmed that courting in the mid 1950s involved a great deal of walking. Few Australians could afford cars and walking

22 Interview with Melbourne University graduate for 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

23 Interview, 'Graduating in the fifties' project. On the important role of the Student Christian Movement at this time see Howe, *A century of influence*.

was a way of ‘lengthening the time a couple could spend together respectably’. ‘The pleasant winding roads that linked the University with the residential colleges and then with Royal Park were popular when the weather was fine’, she wrote.<sup>24</sup> This was the Circle where the unseemly one and her fiancé strolled. In cold weather ‘courting couples turned to the inexpensive and warm dark cinemas for refuge – and emerged film buffs!’, Factor wrote.

Confirming the notion of Women’s College as a hotbed of politics Inga Clendinnen said of her time as a student there: ‘In a minute I was absorbed into a quite different world of politics and social action’.<sup>25</sup> The young student found herself in a shared room at Women’s College with another prize winner like herself. ‘She was a very pretty girl and she walked around the room naked, and I thought, streuth [laughs] because ... you know, our household had gone in for modesty. And I was very impressed, and she painted, which I was pleased about.’<sup>26</sup>

Elements of the old ‘accomplishments’, reminiscent of the nineteenth century, crept into women’s education at this time: painting, music and dance all featured strongly. A well-rounded, educated woman was supposed to exhibit a range of such accomplishments, all designed to augment her charm in the marriage market and in a family setting. And creativity was a highly desired attribute for women of the 1950s.

Inga Clendinnen, now a distinguished historian and author, became more and more involved with the History Department at Melbourne University:

which was a curious department because it was – it must have been preposterously accessible to its honours students, because I can remember being on friendly terms, not on student–teacher terms, with staff members, certainly by my second year. Going to films with them. We used to have end of year parties for honours students and staff and they were extremely convivial occasions that would go on till very late.<sup>27</sup>

24 June Factor, ‘June Factor’.

25 Clendinnen, transcript of interview for Australian Biography Project, p. 1.

26 Ibid.

27 p. 2.

*Outside the conventions?*

But there was also a dark side to the romance plot. And the close relations that small university departments fostered could have an ugly element. Combined with the heady joys of intellectual work it rendered young women vulnerable to the charms – and predatory action – of their professors. Cassandra Pybus described the explosive link for one young woman of the intellectual and the sexual, as we have seen.<sup>28</sup> Pybus wrote that Suzanne Kemp's teachers, both male and female, interested the eighteen-year-old far more than 'the callow youths' of her acquaintance. In her diaries Suzanne admitted to crushes on both a female teacher and a male. 'She devoured works by the French existentialists – Camus, Sartre and de Beauvoir', Pybus writes. Further 'the idea that thinking was a valid activity was totally new to her and she revelled in it'.<sup>29</sup> In this context was she 'ripe for the erotic spiritual combination that was so fashionable in some intellectual circles'?<sup>30</sup>

The attentions of her philosophy professor in her second year at the university were puzzling but not unwelcome: 'I find my feelings for P Orr very childish ... very immature, useless, idiotic ... I will try to control my feelings', she confided to her diary.<sup>31</sup> Attracted by his radical views on moral issues, Suzanne was nevertheless deeply confused to be the object of attention of a married man, a senior member of the university. She was aware too of the power she felt she held in the transaction: 'The power one has over men is terrifying ... if only one could experiment without hurting others'.<sup>32</sup>

She identified with the ideas conveyed in his lectures: 'His ideas on love especially interested me', she told the court that eventually heard the case against Professor Orr. 'He used to say that he felt love in all its forms to be supreme and good, and whether it was expressed

28 Cassandra Pybus, *Gross moral turpitude*. See Chapter 2.

29 p. 85.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 p. 87.

conventionally, that is by marriage, or outside the conventions, it was still ... the highest value in his life'.<sup>33</sup>

This was a story doomed to end in disaster in the straight-laced, conventional world of the mid 1950s. It was also complicated by Cold War paranoia. Senior professors supported Orr, less because of the sexual elements of the story (that was not considered central) but because those seeking his downfall were deemed, incorrectly, to be part of a communist plot. A decade later it might have been a different story. A 'love' affair, hidden and confusing, resulted in several shattered lives.<sup>34</sup> Two decades later, prompted by feminists, universities named such behaviours as unacceptable and proscribed certain exploitative relations between faculty and students. Yet seeds were being sown of the end of an era. Students versed in existential ideas, and the works of 'beat' poets and new wave cinema, would not comfortably support the old ways.

The sexual attractiveness of male professors led Sylvia Plath to a disastrous encounter during a Boston summer. Her friend and roommate Nancy Hunter observed with concern Plath's developing relationship with a visiting biology professor they met on the library steps at Harvard.<sup>35</sup> The concern was justified as Plath was raped, suffering life-threatening haemorrhaging. Hunter Steiner reflected that Plath did not appear to learn from this episode, that she 'enjoyed stalking danger',<sup>36</sup> a frightening insight into her mental 'duality'. The availability of attractive female students was taken for granted by many male professors, as interviews reveal. But most students did not suffer such dire consequences; at least they did not generally reveal them. More commonly male professors were seen as founts of wisdom, to be admired if not emulated.

The benign face of faculty–student interaction, indeed the deeply valued part, was a revelation to Inga Clendinnen. She had immense re-

33 p. 91.

34 ch 10.

35 Steiner, *A closer look at Ariel*, pp. 37–46.

36 p. 47.

spect for her professor of history. Coming from the provincial town of Geelong, her horizons were expanded through the history department.

But [Professor] Crawford did a kinder thing and a more remarkable thing. He was a gentleman, a cultivated gentleman, the first one I had ever seen, because in Geelong we were all philistines and he was prepared to display his cultivation, without condescension, to a provincial girl. You know the Melbourne History Department was my Paris. I had exactly that sense of an expanding world and another lovely man took John and me off to their house, fed us a beautiful dinner and then we listened to Wagner till four in the morning, and I had no idea people did that sort of thing. So I had, I had a milieu where a quick tongue was an advantage, instead of viewed as an aggressive weapon, and a lot of people, but most particularly Crawford, who would exhibit, as it were, the graces of a cultivated mind because he properly understood that as one of his duties.<sup>37</sup>

## Lift off to get out

If Melbourne University's History Department was the Paris of Inga Clendinnen's hopes and dreams others wanted the real thing. If not Paris, then somewhere far from their current location. What they wanted was escape.

As we have seen, the young Jill Ker took off for Harvard and graduate school and the rest as they say is history. Jill Ker Conway has written movingly of her experiences in the US in her autobiography *True north*. Interestingly she became the first female president of Smith College, the liberal arts college that features so much in this book. Her account of those years appears in her third autobiographical volume, *A woman's education*.<sup>38</sup> Her life was transformed by living in an intensely intellectual milieu where women's intelligence was accepted.

The theme of escape was a dominant one for so many highly educated women of the 1950s and early 60s. Of her high school friend

37 Clendinnen, transcript of interview for Australian Biography Project, p. 2.

38 Jill Ker Conway, *A woman's education*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2001.

Fran, a student at Stanford, Lois Banner writes: ‘Fran seized the chance to return to Europe [in the middle of her sophomore year]. She wanted to go back to the places abroad where she had felt so free’.<sup>39</sup> Another wrote of her junior year abroad, ‘I felt I had lift off to get out’.<sup>40</sup> Gloria Steinem escaped, first to Europe then to India. Europe, India, the US and England could all be represented as sites of freedom and exoticism, but was it just the fact of being far from home that was so important in the task of self-making? For many country girls the city was new world enough, the History Department ‘my Paris’. ‘Going to Smith was about the most liberating experience a girl from a small Oklahoma town could have back in 1953’, one wrote in her reunion survey, echoing Clendinnen’s words.<sup>41</sup>

The junior year abroad – that institution in several American colleges – was a revelation to many women. Australians usually had to wait until they had finished their degrees, then, having worked and saved for a year or so, they took off in droves by sea or air to see the world, undertaking ‘supply teaching’ in London and backpacking, or hitchhiking as they called it, around Europe. This was the standard Australian trip to Europe.

Another Smith student, Canadian Alison Prentice, who graduated in 1955, wrote to her parents of her junior year abroad, spent in Paris and Geneva:

[Sept/October, Paris 1953]

Dear Family:

So much has happened since Tuesday I don’t know where to begin! The conference that afternoon was terrific – by one of the leaders of the non-communist labor movement in France. He explained to us the organization of syndicates – their problems, the methods of working with the government and with the employers. Told us also all about the August strike here – the events and basic social conditions

39 Banner, *Finding Fran*, p. 118.

40 Nadya Aisenberg and Mona Harrington, *Women of academe: outsiders in the sacred grove*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, MA, 1988, p. 24.

41 Anonymous student comment, Class of 1957, 25th Reunion book, 1982, Smith College Archives.

which caused it. Like all Frenchman he felt every thing he had to say very passionately. The French tend to look at ideals and sentiments instead of at the facts.

After several weeks in Paris, Prentice travelled to Geneva.

It is really a wonderful place to be – I will hate to leave. Yet I think no matter how much I'll miss Geneva, I learned here a new way of appreciating things and I think that when I get back to the States & home, I will see, understand and enjoy a lot wider range of life than before.

Did you see that the Supreme Court ruled that segregation in education is unconstitutional? I think that is really terrific. Gives one a lot more faith in our democracy. Things move slowly – especially reforms – but they seem to move just the same! This is good propaganda for the U.S. too. One of the most embarrassing questions to answer is the one concerning discrimination, so blatantly obvious, in America.<sup>42</sup>

Prentice's awareness of the issue of race and the questioning it brought in both Europe and India was a spur to greater understanding than she had experienced before. She encountered a range of different views on such issues as politics, economics and labour and her emerging awareness sometimes struggled with entrenched national stereotypes. In Geneva she wrote of Dutch and Indian friends: her circle was widening and with it her understanding.

Excuse me for going on and on about this one person, but Semjon is one of the most interesting people I've met. We have the most fabulous arguments – especially with B. the Indian boy, who is understandably quite nationalist in his opinions because of India just so recently getting her independence. He joined the Communist party to fight against the English, before independence – of course dropped it after the end was accomplished. It is interesting to see another way in which Communism finds its adherents – however also good to find that after there [sic] countries have obtained national sovereignty, communist membership drops off drastically.

A few nights ago we went to the Maison Internationale and heard a lecture by a Burmese boy. He gave his ideas on the situation in Southeastern Asia, excluding China and North Korea. It was very interesting. He explained the searches for national sovereignty, the desire for the recovery of *dignity* after colonialism. The efforts to find a mean between western cultural ideas and sets of

42 Prentice letters, private collection, Geneva, Spring 1953.

values and the old sets of values belonging to their ancient cultures and civilizations. Their not wanting to align themselves with either the western or the communist blocks.

### Before leaving Europe Prentice travelled to Berlin:

Saturday we spent in the eastern sector. We saw Treptoff park with the huge Russian victory monuments; made a huge tour of Stalinallee (Stalin avenue) where we spent a lot of time in the Karl Marx book store. Saw a propaganda movie. Ate in two state owned restaurants known as H.O.s. Walked to Marx-Engels Place, & then down Unter den Linden, the old centre of Berlin, where the Nazi headquarters used to be. Monday we went to the Eastern sector again – had fascinating conversations with a clerk at the Marx book store & with four young students from a northern province; saw an operetta. I have taken notes on our conversations and on all the things we saw in the eastern sector – will have many things to tell you when I get home. Those two days were almost the most important of my whole stay in Europe I think.<sup>43</sup>

The 1950s and early 60s in Australia and the US were notable for their Cold War climate, as we have seen (Chapter 2), and Smith College, Prentice's alma mater, was no exception. This was hardly the era in which it might be expected that students would engage with issues such as communism, anti-colonial struggle, labour movements and protest. Yet in the heady postwar atmosphere of Europe many American students did see other societies for themselves and begin to question ideas that were taboo at home. Back at Smith College Prentice was more discerning:

Afterwards we went to a lecture given by an American news correspondent who had been in Russia. It was really interesting to compare what she said to what Wim & I found in East Berlin.<sup>44</sup>

### Looking back now Prentice sees that time as deeply formative:

I sensed the anti-Americanism, the Marshall Plan that we thought so wonderful was not very popular with a lot of my European friends ... I met an American

43 Prentice letters, private collection, Berlin, 14 July 1954.

44 Fall 1954.

couple who were communists and tried in a very subtle way to draw me into the Communist Party ... I enjoyed them very much but they were definitely communist and I knew that and that they had lost their passports as a result ... I'm not a communist. I didn't want to be a communist. But I think that a lot of seeds were sown that made me fairly left later on.<sup>45</sup>

Young arrivals in Europe were much given to comparisons, making judgements that often faded over time. One woman described young French people to her parents thus:

In general there is a certain unwholesomeness about them, but this is compensated for by their expressive faces, their intellectual development and spontaneity.

They are great fun, but lack the real joie de vivre that the Americans have. The youth at home in the US are clean, vital, full of life and energy, but they lack polish and cultural deepening and I prefer a good witty conversation with a European to the small talk at home. However, I couldn't ever live here I don't think. If I can combine the freshness of our country with a real wisdom and intelligence then I shall be happy.<sup>46</sup>

That attitude slowly changed:

I am finding myself more and more in tune with Europe. I am beginning to open my eyes and see things around me. It is good to have to speak a foreign language because one can't talk – one has to LISTEN to everything.

Back at Smith she was committed to taking honours in French and had some strong comments to make about the education offered.

As a student, here at Smith, everything is handed to you on a golden platter, all one has to do is reach out and taste it. It is admirably administrated, However, there is no liberty ... we are indoctrinated and taught to accept, rather than to CRITICIZE. The student feels that she has no real place in society – she has nothing of the prestige and power of the European student ... It [Smith] is all so unnatural and artificial sometimes.

45 Interview with Alison Prentice, 2004.

46 Anne Rittershofer Neumann papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

But aware of the sacrifices her parents had made she added diplomatically: ‘Thank you for giving me a college education; I appreciate it tremendously’.

Like Prentice, Annie was not the same after her year abroad. After a weekend away at Princeton she wrote ‘however I’m afraid that the old college spirit of frivolous dancing and sailing around has long been killed in me and I prefer to sit and talk quietly with several friends’.<sup>47</sup>

She enrolled for a Harvard summer school in 1958 where she met several Harvard graduate students who, she felt, were far more sophisticated.

In a small college you have only your pals as examples. I like the climate of a university ... I love boarding houses. No cleaning up, no dishes to wash, no running to market – just one room and a key to the front door. Privacy, independence, no house mothers standing on the front porch at 1 AM with ball-bats.

She revelled in Harvard’s intellectual life:

The great western Liberal tradition is truly alive here ... – some of the best minds in the country are here. This is a wonderful place. I find companions who speak ‘the same language’ ... – they don’t think I’m a highbrow and too intense and serious.

## He has all the right prerequisites

After her year abroad Smith appeared too narrow: Annie had emerged from the cocoon and could no longer abide the protected environment. But as well as the palpable quest for the intellectual life the romance plot was not far from the surface. In 1958 she wrote to her parents:

47 Ibid.

I have found a wonderful young man ... he has all the right prerequisites – the good family. The lovely manners. The right background; he is brilliant – is going to get his PhD soon and is now working at the Harvard Computation lab and is a teaching fellow – he shares the same loves and interests that I do. He’s alive, mature (nearly 26), solid-down-to-earth and yet delightfully imaginative and creative – has done a great deal with music ... I hate to say too much but I know. I really know as never before that he’s right for me.<sup>48</sup>

To what extent had her year abroad prepared Annie for the marriage market rather than for an intellectual life of her own? The road ahead was to be lived through this paragon, with all the right prerequisites, and the right appearance was critical to the role of consort:

Aug 10 1958 Tomorrow: I go to Eliz. Arden’s to have my hair shaped, trimmed and lightly curled to last through September and until it can grow out gracefully.

### *Mr and Mrs Degree*

While Annie waited till she had completed her honours degree before marrying, the issue of married student couples in the fifties was common enough to incite comment. An article in *The Texas Ranger* (University of Texas at Austin) in December 1955 stated that ‘The chances that you will leave the University of Texas (UT) as a husband or wife are greater today than ever before’.<sup>49</sup> More students, they claimed, mixed babies and books than at any other time in collegiate history. The reasons were complex. After World War II, returning veterans had boosted levels of married students, a rise that was expected to decrease as time went by. However, the expected decrease did not happen and married students became 23 per cent of the entire UT student body. Some attributed early marriage to an unsettled environment, fear of the draft or of nuclear weapons, as well as increasing prosper-

48 Ibid.

49 Jerry Hall and Bob Knight, ‘Mr and Mrs Degree’, *The Texas Ranger*, December 1955, p. 24.

ity and the promise of good jobs after graduation. There were of course far more married men at UT: 3503 to 604 married women.

If both the student husband and wife were in college it was assumed both would have part-time jobs. Financial realities intruded. The *Ranger* noted that the best solution seemed to be ‘a marriage judiciously subsidized by parents, with no strings attached’.<sup>50</sup> Some college campuses at this point provided inexpensive student housing. June Factor, an arts student in Melbourne, married her medical student husband in December 1956 – a common marrying time, she noted, just after the academic exams.<sup>51</sup> A Commonwealth Scholarship provided her with four pounds and fourteen shillings a week, slightly more than the weekly rent. ‘We lived on our small savings’, she wrote, ‘a University loan, regular food supplies from my parents, and weekend and holiday work’.<sup>52</sup>

While the level of married student couples at UT seems remarkably high, it nevertheless draws attention to a wider phenomenon that was particularly marked in women’s colleges in the US.

*The Radcliffe News* noted that 1949 was the first year Harvard law was open to women, and that the first Harvard MD for women had been awarded in 1949.<sup>53</sup> While long-sought opportunities were opening up it seemed that few women heeded the call. For the class of 1951 the destinations noted were teaching, the combined nursing program, publishing, library work and management training. The most popular choices for the class of ’53 were English and social relations (a mix of clinical psychology and sociology), and only 13 per cent chose sciences. English and social relations were the choices of those contemplating early marriage.

Most were interested in education and careers with children. There were many opportunities for education and child psychology majors to develop those interests. The ideas of Anna Freud were popular: ‘Anna Freud stresses the importance of child’s emotional fulfil-

50 Ibid.

51 Factor, ‘June Factor’, p. 135.

52 p. 136.

53 *The Radcliffe News*, 12 May 1950.

ment'.<sup>54</sup> The 3 October 1952 issue of *The Radcliffe News* noted again that 'Anna Freud Offers Guidance for Child training, Education'. A series of eleven undergraduate lectures were to be held on the role of parenthood. 'Human behaviour will be described in relation to instincts and drives and the individual's fight against these drives, the psychology of conflict. The community of 2 year olds is a savage community, and needs to be trained'. With such a challenging prospect who needed degrees in law or medicine?

A December issue of *The Radcliffe News* offered telling statistics on graduates of the class of 1957: '34 percent of the class of '57 are married, 24 percent are in graduate school, and about 40 percent have jobs'.<sup>55</sup> That a third of the class was married raises issues about the seriousness with which students undertook their degree. Was it just a finishing gloss to a good general education, aimed at preparing a woman for a life of motherhood and parenting?

Many women in the mid-fifties completed their degrees as married women, as Mary Goldsmith did. Some young husbands were serving in the armed forces and their wives lived in college dormitories. In 1953 *The Radcliffe News* profiled 'Mrs Holly Walker Butler '53 married already but husband completing with US army – she met him at an Orientation dance!' By 1961 the numbers of those married at graduation had declined. In the Radcliffe Class of 1961 twelve members of class were 'married and not working', six travelling and the majority of the class of 241 were either working or studying.<sup>56</sup>

A young Stanford student transferred to the East and Barnard College on marriage at age twenty. Her professor said, on hearing the news, 'Women are camp followers, that's something institutions like schools are going to have to adjust to'.<sup>57</sup>

54 *The Radcliffe News*, 21 April 1950, p. 1.

55 13 December 1957.

56 *Radcliffe News from the College*, 1961.

57 Susan (Borman) Delattre 1938, papers 1947–1985, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University.

## A subtle constriction at the edges

Commentators in the wider community worried about women students' narrow preoccupations. David Riesman, author of the influential book *The lonely crowd*, and keen observer of women's colleges, wrote of the high attrition rate at girls' [sic] colleges 'where a third marry and continue at their husbands' base or quit and take a job'.<sup>58</sup>

The reference to a husband's base reflects the pervasiveness, the taken-for-granted nature, of army training. 'It is equalitarian marriage that the girls and the boys both want', he noted. Riesman cited a *Mademoiselle* survey from 1954 that revealed that feminism was universally rejected. (Did *Mademoiselle* have some vested interest here?) Young women wanted 'sober, suburban marriage; intellectually and emotionally alive and pleasant'. Tellingly, he claimed that they 'travel as "tourists" but not as foreign correspondents or expatriates or even as anthropologists'. Yet they want jobs, he continued, 'a whole generation wants not a career but a job as a supplement to marriage'.<sup>59</sup>

Women worked to supplement family income. 'It must be terribly hard on women of the feminist era teaching in the women's colleges today', Riesman wrote. 'I believe that the virtual elimination of the feminist stance has somewhat constricted the choices.' He wrote of the nineteenth century when failure to marry was regarded as a social disaster, but not necessarily an indicator of possible neurosis or even tendencies to perversion.<sup>60</sup>

Riesman spoke of the need to expose students to 'excellence', to overcome the 'curious worldly parochialism of the young': 'there is a subtle constriction at the edges'. He questioned the idea of 'togetherness' – suggesting instead 'apartness', claiming that 'college walls today are almost too permeable. It is possible to grow up and attend high school and college without ever having had the moratorium that

58 David Riesman, 'Women: their orbits and their education', *Journal of the American Association of University Women*, 51(2), 1958, p. 78.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

most of us need to develop and in fact even to discover who we are'.<sup>61</sup> But togetherness was flavour of the month.

Fifty years earlier the philosopher Michael Oakeshott had argued for 'the gift of an interval' for undergraduates of Oxford and Cambridge, referring to an interval free from the pressures of ordinary life.<sup>62</sup> There was to be no interval for those young women concerned about their matrimonial chances.

Dean Nancy Lewis of Pembroke was another who was concerned at the college girl's narrow aspirations: 'the college girl of today seems to be devoting little of her attention to the fields for entry into which she fought so hard in past generations', she claimed in 1954. She might have been speaking of the opening of Harvard medicine and law to women. And why, she asked?

Because she saw women put off in the depression, she instinctively recognized that her career must be a warm and human one if it is to compensate for a home and a family, and senses that a job growing out of her traditional interest in the humanities and the social studies – if she can find one – will be more apt to meet this need ... She is still primarily interested in the traditional feminine fields. The picture of the married college girl has become a familiar one on every campus.<sup>63</sup>

### *You didn't burn your bra then*

There were fewer married women students with children but a hardy band did complete their degrees as mothers. In spite of the family-oriented nature of the times there was little quarter given for those who attempted to combine both quest and romance. A Texan lawyer described her experience in remarks made to the 1999 law school celebration:

61 p. 80.

62 Cited in P.H. Partridge, 'The growth of the universities', *Australian Quarterly*, 31(2), 1959, p. 33.

63 Lewis, 'College women and their proper spheres', p. 210.

I'm sure I'm not the first one to enter law school married but I did. I married a young, fresh, upstart out of Houston, Texas ... I fell madly in love with him, and married him between semesters of my junior year at the University of Texas undergraduate school.

The first day of law school was very interesting. I had had a baby in November and that child was six months old when school started ...

During that first class that summer I had to leave to throw up. I merely thought it was nerves. This kept happening for the next two or three months. Well guess what ... I was pregnant again. And I told no-one, until I appeared back at school in September in maternity outfits. Dean K. did not take to this ... well he just had a fit. And he said no-one had been allowed to stay in law school pregnant ... Now I was going to be in law school with two children fifteen months apart. He said I couldn't do that. You didn't burn your bra then. But we just begged, and our compromise was that there would be no easy things done for me and I would have to make it on my own. And that's what I did. I was a very, very part-time student.<sup>64</sup>

June Factor wrote her honours thesis at Melbourne University while expecting her first child. 'Having a baby and studying were even less compatible than they are now', she reflected. 'The baby grew in the womb, my thesis took shape, and I carefully avoided thinking too far ahead. Nobody said why don't you defer? I don't think the word had been invented in university circles'.<sup>65</sup> Her graduation picture – complete with graduating husband and fourteen-month-old daughter – was featured on the front page of a daily paper. As she wrote, 'To be a graduate and a mother was still uncommon and therefore remarkable'.

The early marriages, the married students, mothers even, of the 1950s and early 1960s were indeed remarkable. They were, as we have seen, much remarked upon by social commentators and women graduates from an earlier era, often with the typical incomprehension of elders. Commentators also noted student conformity. Dressed in their sweaters and skirts, their white bobbysox in the US, their Bermuda shorts and cashmere sweaters at the women's colleges, they appeared a picture of conformity. In Australia skirts and twin-sets with

64 Surrenden Angly in celebratory compilation by Maresh, 'Our place in history', p. 343.

65 Factor, 'June Factor', p. 136.

Peter Pan collars were *de rigueur*, cotton and nylon dresses with hoop petticoats in summer. An Australian remembers, 'we (most of us) spent hours every morning applying make-up and selecting a Becoming outfit. Girls who wore slacks were either Fast or Communists'.<sup>66</sup>

## The rebels

At Melbourne University in 1956 Germaine Greer wanted the right gaberdine coat – the clothing of choice of the in set, the 'current version of subfusc, dignified, drab and clerkly'. If only her father had helped her as he had once assisted a friend, she reflected, in *Daddy, we hardly knew you*, 'I might have had a gabardine coat as good as the one Ann Kornan carried over her arm or slung over her shoulder when her Daddy dropped her off at the caf door in the Jag and every man and boy in the room rushed to hang it up for her'.<sup>67</sup>

Greer resented her father's comment that her friends 'savoured of scruffiness'. Few had much money. Greer had a scholarship that paid her fees and as a holder of a Teachers College Studentship an allowance of eight pounds a week. 'I made my own skirts and knitted my own cardigans', Greer claimed,

because once I had paid for my fares and my stockings and underwear, and my books and writing materials, there was no money left. Sometimes I bought my shoes in sales ... We would tell each other when there was a cosmetic promotion and carefully husband the tiny phials of *Je Reviens* that were given away as samples.<sup>68</sup>

This was a familiar pattern for many Australian women, particularly those who were the first in their families to ascend the university

66 Anonymous survey respondent, 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

67 Germaine Greer, *Daddy, we hardly knew you*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1989, p. 197.

68 pp. 197–198.

ladder and were assisted into higher education by scholarships and studentships. They were a far cry from the often wealthy young women who attended the elite colleges of the US and were able to follow the fashions of the time. Greer affected a sagging tweed coat and sloppy joes – a more bohemian version of the uniform of the 1950s but one adopted more by necessity than for fashion.

When Plath moved from the homelike atmosphere of Haven House at Smith to the scholarship house, Lawrence, she moved into the realm of young women who undertook certain domestic chores in exchange for financial help. Not all college students came from wealthy backgrounds. These students were exceptions to the campus culture described above, fitting more readily into the rebel category. They often ‘affected dirty jeans, bare feet and deliberate gaucheries to demonstrate their contempt for values they considered superficial’.<sup>69</sup> Some clearly felt that as scholarship girls ‘they should look the part’. Yet Plath did not fit this picture.

Nancy Hunter, meeting her new roommate for the first time as the latter returned after her well-publicized suicide attempt, expected to find someone ‘plain or dull or deliberately dowdy’. She was so taken by surprise by Plath’s appearance that she found herself blurting to the assembled lunch table ‘They didn’t tell me you were beautiful’, much to her subsequent embarrassment.<sup>70</sup> Hunter thought Plath’s clothes and manner deliberately cultivated to disguise any distinction: there was no rebellious attempt to appear different. Plath described herself at this stage as working her way through college.<sup>71</sup> As well as taking on house chores she brought in substantial funds from her writing and for literary prizes. She had a calculated sense of her appearance, bleaching her hair over the summer of 1954 (‘the platinum summer’) and trying out with it, her mother thought, a more adventurous personality.<sup>72</sup> On her return to college Sylvia darkened her hair, commenting,

69 Steiner, *A closer look at Ariel*, p. 12.

70 p. 16.

71 Plath, *Letters home by Sylvia Plath*, p. 147.

72 p. 138.

My brown-haired personality is most studious, charming and earnest. I like it and have changed back to colorless nail polish for convenience and consistency ... I feel that this year with my applying for scholarships, I would much rather look demure and discreet.<sup>73</sup>

What drove young women's passions, their will to achieve, to become graduate women in those conservative times? For some it was a continuation of habits formed as school girls. Greer writes: 'When I was fourteen years old, imprisoned in a bookless house, bored at school and double-bored at home, the Public Library was my Valhalla'.<sup>74</sup> 'So the habit of a lifetime was formed. More of my waking life has been spent in libraries with a pen in my hand than anywhere else'.<sup>75</sup> Libraries played an important part for many: perhaps they were the ultimate antithesis to domestic life. 'I made many earthshaking discoveries in the Fisher Reading Room', wrote Jill Ker Conway, 'as I sat at one of the long heavy mahogany tables, semi-oblivious to the rustling of other students' papers and the counterpoint of whispered conversations'.<sup>76</sup>

## Libraries or laboratories?

Women entered a particularly narrow band of courses at this time. Hilarie Lieb argues of the US that the influx of war veterans both pushed men into traditional fields at a greater rate than before the war and also discouraged women from pursuing those areas. Most of the change was due to an increase of male representation within fields that were male dominated to begin with. The result was that the period from 1947 to 1957 showed the greatest gender segregation, with more

73 p. 144.

74 Greer, *Daddy, we hardly knew you*, p. 68.

75 p. 69.

76 Conway, *The road from Coorain*, p. 174.

fields male dominated and women concentrated into a very small number of fields of study. Lieb, an economist, argues that in the ten to twelve years following the war, the lower expected market returns on investment in higher education for women combined with the relatively higher costs for parents to educate their daughters relative to their sons kept the growth of bachelor's degrees for women relatively low.<sup>77</sup> Yet despite the discouragement large numbers of women did enrol in science degrees.

In the following period from 1957 to 1964, which Lieb characterizes as that of the Sputnik Effect, there was a partial decrease in that gender segregation, male-dominated fields dropping from 78.7 per cent in 1957 to 58.5 per cent in 1964. The main growth came in the fields of the social sciences, including psychology, sociology, history and anthropology, where the representation of men and women was more evenly balanced.<sup>78</sup> Engineering and the physical sciences remained relatively unchanged. Yet, as Margaret Rossiter pointed out, this was a time when American women were being urged into the workforce, 'scientific womanpower' was sought and bright women were considered a 'precious national resource'.<sup>79</sup> No wonder women felt they were torn in two directions.

In Australia, where the degree structure was significantly different, gender segregation of courses was similarly observed.<sup>80</sup> There was an important difference however. Women in Australia did not undertake a bachelor's degree before undertaking professional studies in medicine or law. Thus some strayed into law or medicine straight from high school, acquiring a profession, and a professional socialization, that stood them in good stead even with early marriage. They did

77 Hilarie H. Lieb, *Federal policy and women's investment in higher education: post World War II to the present*, Northwestern University, Department of Economics, no date, p. 5. See also Hilarie Lieb, *Federal policy and the gender gap: the 'baby-boom' generation*, Verlag Dr Müller, Saarbrücken, Germany, 2010.

78 p. 7.

79 Margaret W. Rossiter, *Women scientists in America: before affirmative action 1940–1972*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1995, p. 69.

80 Mackenzie, *Women in Australia*.

not have the challenge of the American women of having to return to undertake a professional degree after their initial liberal arts.

## For pleasure not for grades

Was this the last period when women could take an arts course for its own sake, with little thought for the vocational consequences? Many describe the sheer joy of learning, of being taught by inspiring teachers, of having their ideas challenged, expanded and even overturned. Most did not notice that all their professors were men.

Although I knew almost nothing about University faculties, the teaching system and all the rest, I had blind confidence that the delights and truths of literature and history were central to the world – well to my world.<sup>81</sup>

‘Despite occasional boredom, and irritation with dull and lifeless texts or pedantic, narrow-minded teachers, my confidence was never seriously shaken’, wrote one.<sup>82</sup> Brilliant teachers could turn dreary subjects into exciting performances. June Factor recalls:

The only pleasure to be found in Philosophy 1 were Dr Gasking’s lectures on logic – performances rather than lectures, with Gasking pacing up and down the old Public Lecture Theatre, pausing dramatically to ask a rhetorical question about time or the nature of reality.<sup>83</sup>

Lois Banner’s philosophy teachers at UCLA seemed captivated by existentialism, ‘especially by its emphasis on the alienation of the individual and the monotony of daily life’.<sup>84</sup> In literary studies in the English-speaking world new criticism dominated, with its formal

81 Factor, ‘June Factor’, p. 120.

82 Anonymous survey respondent, ‘Graduating in the fifties’ project.

83 Factor, ‘June Factor’, p. 120.

84 Banner, *Finding Fran*, p. 109.

analysis and abandonment of context. Some were lucky enough to be taught by well-known literary characters such as W.H. Auden. Alison Prentice described him to her parents:

One of the most brilliant poets, certainly the greatest contemporary American [sic] poet, he is also a wonderful man. A little vague and eccentric, very uninhibited and funny – he is also very warm and human. He gave a lecture on the comic and had some wonderful things to say on just plain how to live. It's hysterical to have someone like that about – everyone talks about him (he is always doing crazy things to talk about) and loves him.<sup>85</sup>

Of the Smith symposium where Auden and other literary figures and artists debated, Prentice reported: 'The problem of how much the moral expression of the artist influences society was argued to no final conclusion'.

Inga Clendinnen was delighted to find that the authors of books she had read indeed existed. 'I'd read this book of essays [on the Renaissance] and I had fallen in love with it', she reflected,

and with the essays and with the vision of the past having been really alive, which is a well kept secret in the writings of most historians, [I] never for a moment believe[d] those characters had been real. And Crawford had the knack of making them real and establishing a connection with you and them, mediated by him ... Before that books had been these mysterious things in libraries and on shelves but of course you never knew the person who'd written them. They belonged to some godlike breed, they lived in some other place altogether. So for [Max] Crawford to be there and be lecturing to me seemed to me quite astonishing.<sup>86</sup>

Lois Banner (then Wendland), as we have seen, felt as if she were entering a new and privileged world.<sup>87</sup>

Others were just 'eager to get into the work'. 'I shall work for pleasure and not for grades', wrote one young college student.<sup>88</sup> Yet an overall preoccupation for many was what they had learned about

85 Prentice letters, private collection, Northampton, Spring 1953.

86 Clendinnen, transcript of interview for Australian Biography Project, p. 2.

87 Banner, *Finding Fran*, p. 109.

88 Journal of Alice Gorton Hart.

the world and about themselves. Writing of her final exams, a Smith student pondered:

Are they testing us for knowledge of the world: of morality and psychology and of ourselves and our philosophy, that is really vital when we leave here, or are they testing us on critical knowledge of literature? I hope to God that I have learned and absorbed things that are worthwhile from all the reading and have matured a little in my understanding of the way of the world and its inhabitants.<sup>89</sup>

‘I graduated’, Alice Gorton wrote in her diary, almost casually – ‘there was a long wait, flip tassel – switch, passing diplomas’. She was more concerned that she had spent too much time at the ceremony draped over the arm of her fiancé.

Sylvia Plath wrote joyously of her work:

As to my subjects – I’m beginning to see the light. I love them all. I’m being stretched, pulled to heights and depths of thought I never thought possible – and what is most wonderful – this is only a beginning. The future holds infinite hope and challenge.<sup>90</sup>

Elsewhere she wrote ‘I just can’t stand the idea of being mediocre’.<sup>91</sup>

Plath was also a scholarship holder although unlike Greer she was not a recipient of a state scholarship with all its impersonal connotations. She was delighted to find that her part scholarship of \$850 to Smith College was funded by an alumna, Olive Higgins Prouty, a well known inter-war writer, and one with feminist interests. Plath wrote happily to Prouty ‘so that’, she confided to her mother, ‘the people who give out the money are rewarded by a flesh-and-blood case’.<sup>92</sup> ‘As for the courses’, Plath wrote to her benefactor,

I have never felt such a sharp sense of stimulation and competition. I am specially fortunate in my instructors – all of whom are vital and alive with enthusiasm for their particular subjects. In art we sketch the same trees that we analyse

89 Ibid.

90 Plath, *Letters home by Sylvia Plath*, p. 59.

91 p. 57.

92 Ibid.

in botany. In French we follow the ideas of men who were influenced by the events and times we read about in history. And in English – which has always been my favourite subject – we read and do critical essays.<sup>93</sup>

No doubt aware of Prouty's concern for women, Plath added 'I don't think I've ever been so conscious of the dignity and capacity of women. Why, even in my house there is a startling collection of intelligent, perceptive girls – each one fascinating in her own way'.<sup>94</sup> Plath subsequently developed a close friendship with Prouty: 'It's nice to have a scholarship mean more than a grant of money', she reflected, after receiving her first reply from Prouty.<sup>95</sup>

At the end of her first year Plath worried about her choices for the following year. 'I am extremely lost as to which courses to take next year', she wrote. Wondering if she could earn her own living she thought about the possibility of social work. 'The question is', she wondered,

shall I plan for a career? (ugh – I hate that word) or should I major in English and art and have a freelance career? If I ever catch a man who can put up with the idea of having a wife who likes to be alone and working artistically now and then, I would like to start thinking about where I'll put the emphasis for the rest of my brief life.<sup>96</sup>

Was Plath prescient in her reference to her brief life? Or were those words the typical histrionic musings of a teenage girl? After all, she was just nineteen at the time. Whatever the particular poignancy behind the words, the sentiments, the dilemma – whether to plan for a career, whether to freelance as an artist in the light of the expected destination of marriage – was common to most of the young women of the time. In the following chapter we will see how they came to terms with that double bind: the need to be themselves and to devote themselves to a husband and family.

93 p. 61.

94 Ibid.

95 p. 63.

96 p. 68.



## 4 Life after college: a problematic realm

For women, to search for a tradition of past female autonomy and influence is to enter a problematic realm, full of anxiety and ambivalence.<sup>1</sup>

The pioneers in multiple roles came into their own.<sup>2</sup>

I had abdicated that responsibility [for plotting my own life] mindlessly following the Very Easy Simplicity Pattern for good girls, circa 1958.<sup>3</sup>

Did going to university matter? ‘Well completely. That’s about all that I can say ... I don’t think I could live and breathe if I hadn’t been to university. I just couldn’t imagine it’, claimed one woman.<sup>4</sup>

Mary Goldsmith had a lifelong love affair with universities. She married in 1949, finishing her arts degree in another Australian state in 1950. Over the next few years Mary combined marriage, overseas postings with her husband, the birth of five children and teaching economics at a girls’ school. Her degree, although in arts, contained a significant amount of economics. Mary had loved her university days as we saw in the last chapter – it was an exciting period with many ex-servicemen on campus.

She began with the typical ‘girl track’ of many university women at this time: marriage, children and voluntary work at the local kindergarten.

But ... when my eldest daughter, and she was my third child, when she was born, ’58 it must have been, having a girl, I thought this was terrific. I can do anything now I’ve got a daughter. So I decided to go back to university. So I went back to Melbourne and did a couple of subjects and decided to do a Master of Arts. Because I was very interested in women’s position. So my thesis was on women and work.

1 Heilbrun, *Hamlet’s mother and other women*, p. 23.

2 Giele, ‘Women’s role change and adaptation’, p. 54.

3 Howatt, ‘Straddling two worlds (or) thank god we knew how to post’.

4 Anonymous survey respondent, ‘Graduating in the fifties’ project.

Yes ... I took that out in 1972 but I was doing that for a long while because I had two more children while I was doing that. I went back to university in 1959. I had to bring my degree up to an honours degree so I didn't bring my preliminary over until 1963.<sup>5</sup>

Goldsmith chose for her thesis a study of women and work in the suburb in which she lived. It was difficult but, as she acknowledged:

My life has been difficult because I have always done too much. And because [my husband] was in general practice I had to do a great deal ... So I tended to bring up the children.

Q: I'm curious why you decided to do it. How you could manage?

Mary: No, no, I can manage more than children. I've never not been interested in the world ... It was never enough for me just to be home. Although I loved all the things: I liked sewing, I like cooking, I like making jam ... and I love the garden, as you can see. I love all those home things. But it was never enough. So I went back and I was interested in what other women were doing. That's why I did the survey.

Mary's topic, women and work, while unusual at the time, reminds us that not all women had lost interest in issues concerning their fate. She was taken by surprise by her findings:

It was very interesting. Actually I found that most women were not interested in much. A lot of women did work, a certain percentage of women worked and they combined it all. They were the ones who in a way were the most satisfied.

Towards the end of that I thought what's it like tutoring, teaching at university. So I got a job as a part-time tutor at Melbourne in economics. Only two classes a week. And I used to feed [my daughter] before I went, have my class, come home and feed her again. I had someone in the house for those years to look after them, and to do the housework and so on, when I was not here.

Researchers have long found the question of women's education and their workforce participation central. Madge Dawson in her study of 1070 University of Sydney graduates spanning several age groups (from over sixty to under thirty) claims that Australian women, as

5 Interview with 'Mary Goldsmith', 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

graduate women elsewhere, seemed to be strongly motivated to use their higher education in paid employment.<sup>6</sup>

Barbara Sicherman also sought to find if higher education made a difference in her study of three cohorts of American ‘college-educated’ women.<sup>7</sup> Indeed it did: ‘It is apparent that college permitted women, both those committed to careers and those who entered the workforce in more discontinuous fashions, to work in professional capacities’, she concluded. She went on to claim that ‘for whatever reason – whether because of reduced marriage and fertility or because early employment fosters a greater desire for work or financial independence – college women were more likely to work at all ages and thus, perhaps, also to experience the increase in authority that usually comes to women who contribute to the family income’.<sup>8</sup> There are big claims here: financial independence and ‘an increase in authority’ within families. What did this look like in practice?

Mary Goldsmith’s story chimes with several key issues raised by Sicherman. Her interest was, to be sure, in the neglected links between college attendance and employment. Yet mixed in with that key question are several others of equal interest. Did women with higher education marry less and have fewer children in the period from 1950 to the mid-sixties? After all, this was the period where marriage and motherhood reigned supreme. If women’s marriage chances were reduced, then for what reasons? Was it by choice or by design? Did they experience earlier employment than others in their cohort, or longer periods in the workforce? Did they have an enhanced desire for financial independence? And, centrally, did that experience of higher education, and hence employment, lead to increased authority, increased self-confidence or ‘bargaining power’ within families?

These were matters that concerned women throughout the world. In 1965 Dawson noted that the question ‘what is the role of a woman in the world today’ was at the centre of contemporary interest. She cited in support those two iconic texts of the time: Betty Friedan’s

6 Dawson, *Graduate and married*, p. 117.

7 Sicherman, ‘College and careers’, p. 161.

8 p. 162.

recently published *The feminine mystique*<sup>9</sup> and Myrdal and Klein's text on women's two roles, which argued that 'In terms of previous generations the women of today have not one but two adult lives to dispose of'.<sup>10</sup>

A wider question teases. How did the experience of higher education affect women's sense of self both as a person and as a woman, possibly as a mother? Did it lead to a feminist or 'proto-feminist' consciousness, a question for a later chapter? How did it shape the sense of continuity for younger women in their families, their influence on their daughters and daughters-in-law, and their students? There are tantalizing glimpses in the interview material of the time. 'Whereas I was raised with discipline imposed from outside it took many years to understand internal moral choices', wrote one American. 'I raised my daughter as I would like to have been raised ... She grew up with a feeling of strength, belief in self – able to cope with other people'.<sup>11</sup> Australian women also demonstrated that higher education had a profound influence on their life and personality. Their education created a chain of influence for the *next* generation. Mary Goldsmith wrote of the differences between her daughter and herself:

One of my daughters who is trying to finish her PhD at the moment went straight through and she got her first class honours degree and then she started to tutor. So of course she knew what it was all about. I didn't. But I learned. I learned pretty fast actually.

My Australian survey<sup>12</sup> indicates the importance of female influence: mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters and female teachers were all mentioned as main influences in the decision to attend university. 'She was a free spirit', one wrote of her mother, 'but she had a very forward thinking view in that she believed women should have the same

9 Betty Friedan, *The feminine mystique*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1963.

10 Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein, *Women's two roles: home and work*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1956, p. 13.

11 Baruch and Barnett, 'Women in the middle years'.

12 'Graduating in the fifties: women graduates family formation project', Alison Mackinnon, Australian Research Council funded research project, 1994.

opportunities as men'.<sup>13</sup> But these questions are for later. Here I am specifically concerned with women's links with the labour market and their sense of themselves as professionals, and as women. How many women were there like Mary Goldsmith who would have liked to go further with an academic career but whose qualifications in the 1980s did not meet the increasingly stringent demands?

Goldsmith enjoyed working at both Melbourne and Monash universities, writing pieces for the popular press as well as teaching.

But by 1980 I was tired of just being a tutor. And yet I didn't have the time to do a PhD. I've always wanted to do a PhD but I just haven't been able to do it. Anyway you couldn't get a lecturing job then. I missed my chance to get a lecturing job.

## What do the surveys tell us?

Sicherman studied three cohorts of highly educated American women, drawing on alumnae surveys for her material. Her groupings were those women who graduated from about 1875–1910, from 1910–1935 and from 1935–1955.<sup>14</sup> Thus her last grouping is directly relevant here. She concluded that 'higher education for women has from the start been linked to enhanced vocational opportunity'.<sup>15</sup> But higher education is a necessary rather than a sufficient condition in Sicherman's view. Economic transformations, politics and changes in the life course all shape the possible outcomes as do 'changes in consciousness and culture'.<sup>16</sup> This is the cohort effect we have noted before. Dawson's work parallels Sicherman's research: she too included several cohorts in her Sydney study: the earliest graduates, the prewar generation and the postwar cohort. As we have seen (Chapter 2) sev-

13 Anonymous survey respondent, 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

14 Sicherman, 'College and careers', p. 133.

15 p. 134.

16 p. 164.

eral major transformations shaped the lives of this generation in both Australia and the US: economically the postwar boom and consumer culture; politically the sense of nation building and the impact of the Cold War; scientifically and technologically the growth of psychology and of studies of sexuality, the development of the birth control pill.

How can we elucidate the links between those transformations and changes in women's consciousness of themselves as professionals? There is a rich archive of data on highly educated women at this time that signals that rebellion was in the wings. In the United States key government commissions such as John F. Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women (1961–63) chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt and reports such as *Womanpower*<sup>17</sup> from the National Management Council revealed the high level of interest of that country in its women's education and employment. The Commission on the Education of Women, supported by the American Council of Education from 1953 to 1962, advocated for and fostered research on women's education.<sup>18</sup> Madge Dawson noted wryly that the Australian government did not show a similar concern for its women.<sup>19</sup>

*Women's lives through time: educated American women of the twentieth-century* is a pioneering volume that draws upon many of the studies in the Murray Center for the Study of Lives. Sicherman's findings, particularly the life patterns of her final group, can be compared then with several other American samples from this volume.

One study of Columbia graduate students of a similar period is particularly telling. Alice Yohalem interviewed 226 women students in 1974 'who had distinguished themselves as scholars in Columbia University graduate faculties or professional schools after World War II' (specifically between 1945 and 1951). They had been awarded fellowships or academic scholarships, had achieved high class rank and/or

17 National Management Council, *Womanpower: a statement, with chapters by the council staff*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1957.

18 Linda Eisenmann, 'A time of quiet activism: research, practice and policy in American women's higher education, 1945–1965', *History of Education Quarterly*, 45(1), 2005, p. 9.

19 Dawson, *Graduate and married*, p. 217.

election to honorary societies.<sup>20</sup> They were a very select group of academic achievers graduating at the very beginning of the 1950s. The date (1963) was chosen as first allowing analysis 'during the years of career and/or family formation'.<sup>21</sup> Yohalem also interviewed this group in 1974, placing principal emphasis on their labour market decisions.

Significantly many of these women had been in college during World War II, when women were recruited to jobs in business and industry. Yohalem found the graduate women in her sample had married relatively late by 1950s standards and had smaller families than their female contemporaries (average family size 2.16 children). As one reflected: 'I was lucky and could have my cake and eat it too only because I was not gripped by the current mania for marrying young'.<sup>22</sup> Yohalem claimed that women who participated in degree programs beyond the baccalaureate 'make implied commitments to careers in the professions or in occupations of corresponding prestige'.<sup>23</sup> Overall her longitudinal study demonstrated that the career commitment of highly qualified women was 'variable in intensity but rarely extinguished'. Only a handful of non-workers (interviewed in 1963) 'had remained preoccupied with family and leisure activities, to the exclusion of gainful employment, during most of their adult lives'.<sup>24</sup>

Here are some interesting conclusions. 'It became clear', Yohalem argued, that the women were 'members of a pivotal group that spanned both the back-to-tradition 1950s and the new feminism that followed'.<sup>25</sup> Elsewhere she called them a 'transitional generation'.<sup>26</sup> Speculatively she argued that the atypical respondents in her study (those who did not marry, married but remained childless, or had limited their families to one child) had become the prevailing model for

20 Yohalem, 'Columbia University graduate students'.

21 p. 141.

22 Alice M. Yohalem, *The careers of professional women: commitment and conflict*, Allanheld Osmun and Co, Monclair, NJ, 1979, p. 55.

23 Yohalem, 'Columbia University graduate students', p. 155.

24 p. 156.

25 p. 141.

26 Yohalem *The careers of professional women*.

contemporary professional women.<sup>27</sup> The atypical patterns enabled them to maintain enduring work commitments.

Those findings are as relevant today, as young professional women seek that enduring commitment and the family patterns that permit it. Sicherman suggested that the family patterns demanded of young professional women in the late twentieth century (and, we might add, the twenty-first) suggest 'at least a partial return to the demographic conditions that accompanied the achievements of American women in the late nineteenth century'.<sup>28</sup>

### *A moratorium?*

Another way of looking at this might be to see the period of the 1950s and early '60s as a moratorium, a rare opportunity for professional women, a period where they could marry early, possibly rear several children (large families, however, were more of a constructed image of the '50s than a reality), then return to careers. This pattern, while not as enduring or as well paid as the life courses of the lawyers, doctors and academics who maintained an ongoing work commitment, was nevertheless fulfilling and allowed for an equally satisfying family life.

Yohalem's work on high achievers highlights the notion that a graduate degree (or achievement beyond the basic degree level) was one way in which women could achieve 'exemption' from the norms of the time. Patricia Graham maintained that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a bachelor's degree put women outside the norms of femininity for the period. By the 1950s a bachelor's degree was not enough: 'College had begun to play the role that high school had in the lives of women at the turn of the century, for many simply a pleasant interlude on the way to growing up'.<sup>29</sup> In the 1950s a graduate (or higher) degree was necessary to place a woman 'outside the

27 p. 156.

28 Sicherman, 'College and careers', p. 162.

29 Graham, 'The cult of true womanhood', p. 403.

norms', providing a 'key to the professions'. It could also allow her to challenge those norms and expectations.

In Australia professional higher education in medicine or law also exempted women from 'the norms'. Those norms, reinforced by popular culture and tax policies, included female dependency and retreat from the public sphere. Dawson found that of the seventeen women in her Sydney group with law degrees not one had never been in paid employment. One Australian lawyer noted frankly of her degree:

Well it put me in an elite ... being a lawyer, having a law degree at that time ... So, as a woman, once you were a lawyer it added value to you and you didn't suffer some of the indignities that women, ordinary women, felt. You know, the guys would say, but you're different because you're a lawyer, and they wouldn't treat you as invisible as often as they would with other women. Or sometimes at a dinner party they'd listen to you or take you seriously ... it did give me more clout than I would have had otherwise.

This effect continued throughout her life:

Being at university put me into networks of people who subsequently became very influential, right, so I think it's something that I take more for granted. But my husband notices that wherever we go I know the chief justice or I know this one or that one or this politician, and more importantly they know me.<sup>30</sup>

Another exemplified the desire for independence: Pam Cleland had travelled widely during her ten years of study in South Australia. She completed an arts degree, a diploma in social work, a new and emerging field, and, eventually, law. She was once told that the reason she had made money out of law was because she had studied social work and had been taught to interview people, 'to have a mirror in the waiting room because people like to see how they are looking ... and to handle them if they are crying'.<sup>31</sup> Cleland had loved the new course in social work: 'Amy Wheaton, who was head of the place, was quite a scholar. She was into Margaret Mead and all the anthropologists.' But she was interested in practising law, in making money so she could be

30 Interview with law graduate, 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

31 Interview with Pam Cleland for 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

independent: 'Independence was very important to me. Because I wasn't very ambitious. So that saves a lot of kow-towing and doing things for the right reasons. Just did what I pleased.'<sup>32</sup>

The medical women had the highest rate of continuous work – and of high earnings<sup>33</sup> – even when married to similarly high earning medical spouses and with children under five.<sup>34</sup> In Australia a case could be made for medical exceptionalism, so committed to their profession were the medical women. A medical career, whether full time or part time, could be combined with marriage and children and would not offend the sensibilities of the time. Nevertheless, many confronted discrimination in salaries and appointments in the public hospital system.

Writing of Australian women in 1962 Norman Mackenzie noted: 'the trend towards a combination of work and homemaking is advancing with increasing speed each year'.<sup>35</sup> Mackenzie found graduate women were less likely to be engaged solely in domestic duties than the national average: 'the graduate woman has a very much greater propensity to work after marriage and to use the training she has received'.<sup>36</sup> In Australia too graduate women were more likely to be in the workforce even through the period considered to be the most conservative of postwar decades. Forty-one per cent of Dawson's married graduate sample was in paid employment, double the percentage of all Australian married women.<sup>37</sup> How was it that a period that encompassed the strongest family ideology, as we have seen, the sharpening of distinctions between the sexes, an increased marriage rate and the strengthening of consumer culture,<sup>38</sup> could also see an increasing number of highly educated women in the workforce?

In what follows I tease out these paradoxes through the lens of graduate women's involvement in paid work after higher education. I

32 Ibid.

33 Dawson, *Graduate and married*, p. 165.

34 p. 128.

35 Mackenzie, *Women in Australia*, p. 95.

36 p. 130.

37 Dawson, *Graduate and married*, p. 143.

38 Cohen, *A consumers' republic*.

also consider the barriers they faced. The conflicts generated by those barriers led irrevocably to the challenging of the notions of women's 'role' which followed in the late 1960s and 1970s. The contradictions became too extreme. Something had to give.

### Becoming visible: increasing numbers of women graduates?

Were there many women students on university and college campuses in Australia and the US in the 1950s and early 60s? And were those numbers increasing? Linda Eisenmann points out of the United States that 'At the start of the war, less than 10 percent of the age cohort had chosen college. By 1950, however, more than 14 percent attended, and a decade later, nearly 24 percent.'<sup>39</sup> In raw numbers, about 2.3 million attended college in 1950, but 3.6 million in 1960 and 5.2 million by 1964.'<sup>40</sup> How did women fare as a proportion of this number? Given the focus on returning servicemen, at least in the early 50s, it would appear that women were fewer than before. Many colleges cut back on female admissions to accommodate the male veterans.'<sup>41</sup> Yet the absolute number of women in higher education actually rose throughout the postwar era, so that, by 1957, college attracted one in every five women between

39 National Center for Educational Statistics, *120 years of American education: a statistical portrait*, 1993, p. 76, cited in Linda Eisenmann, 'Reclaiming the "incidental students": higher education and women in the 1950s', Vice Presidential Address presented at the meeting of the American Education Research Association, Chicago, April 2003, p. 2.

40 US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Historical statistics of the United States: colonial times to 1970*, Kraus International Publications, White Plains, NY, 1989, p. 383, cited in Eisenmann, 'Reclaiming the "incidental students"', p. 4.

41 Cohen, *A consumers' republic*, p.140.

the ages of 18 and 21.<sup>42</sup> In the United States the G.I. Bill was a federal educational entitlement offered to veterans – male and female – of World War II. From the midst of the G.I. Bill era in 1948 to 1963, women’s collegiate enrolments boomed from about 700,000 to nearly 1.7 million, Eisenmann claims. Even where their numbers increased, however, their proportions fell. Eisenmann argues that:

Examining women’s proportion of the collegiate enrollment demonstrates G.I. Bill effects dramatically. Here we see how the availability of veterans’ benefits dampened women’s participation in the several years immediately following the war. From a high of 44.6 percent of all students during the war, women dropped to only 28.8 percent in 1948. As the immediate effects of G.I. Bill funding eased, women slowly reclaimed a stronger share, moving only from under 30 percent of enrollments in 1948 and 1949 to 38.6 percent by 1965. In other words, two decades after the conclusion of the war, women had still not reached their earlier levels of participation; they returned to the wartime high of 40 percent only in 1967.<sup>43</sup>

The result of the large influx of male students after the war had significant effects not only on the proportions of the sexes but on the perceptions of the typical student. Older mature men became an accepted part of the campus scene and women, where they were depicted at all, were often represented as wives of returning servicemen. But, as we heard from one Australian student of the time, the ex-servicemen made campus life more exciting. They rejected puerile pranks and brought a new seriousness to undergraduate life.

In Australia female university enrolment as a percentage of the total fell in the immediate postwar period, from 24.4 per cent in 1946 to 19.1 per cent in 1952, due to large numbers of returning servicemen taking university places. By the early 1960s women again accounted for nearly one quarter of all university enrolments, and the figure was

42 Mabel Newcomer, *A century of higher education for American women*, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1959, Table 2, p. 46.

43 Eisenmann, “Reclaiming the “incidental students””, p. 7, citing statistics from the National Center for Educational Statistics, *120 years of American education*.

rising. And if we consider the actual numbers of women studying at university in this period the change in women's options is evident.<sup>44</sup>

There is an interesting difference between the US figures and those for Australia. Whereas women were 38.6 per cent of the US students enrolled in 1965 they were only 27 per cent of Australian students. Dawson too wrote in 1965 that American women take a higher proportion of university degrees than Australian women. The differences were particularly marked at the higher degree level. In her Sydney sample Dawson claimed that although women had taken out 22 per cent of all first degrees and 17 per cent of Masters degrees, they had only taken out 7 per cent of doctorates. This she compared to a general US number at the time where 'one out of 30 men and one out of 300 women (of a high ability group) actually earn a PhD'.<sup>45</sup>

Overall American women were taking both more undergraduate degrees and more graduate degrees. There were, however, large differences within the systems, both the existence of a range of small liberal arts colleges in the US which were not present in Australia and the tendency of Australian universities at the time to view Masters degrees as a more common vocational end point. The pursuit of a PhD was not as common in the English system on which Australia modelled itself at the time. Indeed Australian universities awarded their first ever home-grown PhD in 1948. Why then were US figures higher? In part due to the long tradition of women's higher education in academies and small liberal arts colleges since the progressive era: the existence of women-only institutions that nurtured women's aspirations was another key aspect.

Women, then, were going to university in increasing numbers in Australia – they made up between one quarter and a third of the undergraduate student body – although, significantly, the numbers of women undertaking postgraduate degrees rose very slowly. It is odd then that women are so rarely seen as part of the university landscape

44 Alison Mackinnon and Penny Gregory, "'A study corner in the kitchen': Australian graduate women negotiate family, nation and work in the 1950s and early 1960s', *Australian Historical Studies*, 37(127), 2006, pp. 63–80.

45 Dawson, *Graduate and married*, p. 217.

of the time and where they are seen they are often categorized as an elite. Perhaps in the context of the smaller Australian population the 20,000 or so women students could be more easily overlooked. In his 1960 study of Adelaide University, for example, A.P. Rowe rarely mentioned female students.<sup>46</sup> In the US, part of that perception may come from the understanding that women did not reach the levels of participation in higher education that they had achieved earlier in the century. They appeared to be more likely to leave after a first degree for employment than in earlier periods, pulled into the growing post-war economy. They were also more likely to enter university as a stepping stone to a good marriage, as higher education (and thus a career) was no longer an alternative to marriage and family but a prelude to it. The widening of the student base of higher education in the 1950s, via scholarships for example, meant that graduates had different expectations: fewer came from a background that allowed them to 'indulge' in further education. In both Australia and the US women made up a high proportion of students in teachers training colleges, not usually included in the university statistics.

A similar invisibility attaches to the participation of women in the labour force in the period. Women were supposed to be at home in the suburbs, the centre of the family. But many were not, as both Mary Goldsmith's life and her small study demonstrated. More precisely many were both 'at home', the centre of the family, *and* in paid work, full time or part time. One of the recurring themes of the Australian and the American stories is the way in which women reconciled these two roles, always conscious of not undermining 'family'. The critical point here is that women were in the workforce but did not relinquish their role as the lynchpin of family life. In fact it was pressed on them even more in the 1950s, leading to an early awareness of women's 'double burden'. Would this discussion have been possible, I wonder, before World War II? Sylvia Plath, on a Fulbright scholarship to Cambridge, UK, wrote of combining her creative life with marriage and children, clearly realizing its challenges: 'I would like a life of

46 A.P. Rowe, *If the gown fits*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1960.

conflict, of balancing children, sonnets, love and dirty dishes; and banging, banging an affirmation of life out on pianos and ski slopes and in bed in bed in bed'.<sup>47</sup>

*Women in the labour force: a continuing upward trend*

'The [US] postwar labor market showed a similar continuing upward trend in female participation', Eisenmann claimed. 'In fact, the participation of adult women in the U.S. labor market has increased each decade since 1900. Even after World War II, the numbers of working women grew from 13 million in 1940 to 16.5 million in 1950.'<sup>48</sup> Sicherman too noted that the absolute number of women in various professions continued to rise even as proportions fell.<sup>49</sup>

How did graduate women fare in this climate? As early as 1952 'over half of [American] college-educated women between forty-five and sixty-four were in the labor force, compared with only 39 percent of high school graduates'.<sup>50</sup> So too in Australia women increasingly entered the labour market although not at the same rate as their American sisters. Whether responding to economic or intellectual aspirations or to national or family obligations, a rising proportion of all mothers in Australia either worked continuously or returned to the workforce once their children were in school. Whereas in 1947 less than 10 per cent of married women aged 15–64 worked outside the home, by the mid-1960s they accounted for almost half of the female labour force with nearly one third of married women employed in paid

47 Kukil, *The unabridged journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 225.

48 Eisenmann, 'Reclaiming the "incidental students"', p. 2, citing Claudia Goldin, *Understanding the gender gap: an economic history of American women*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1990, p. 10.

49 Sicherman, 'College and careers', p. 132. See also Frank Stricker, 'Cookbooks and lawbooks: the hidden history of career women in twentieth century America', *Journal of Social History*, 10, 1976, pp. 1–19.

50 Giele, 'Women's role change and adaptation', p. 38, citing US Department of Labor figures from 1969.

work.<sup>51</sup> And, as Mackenzie pointed out, graduate women were more likely to be employed outside the home.

What did that participation in work mean to women in a time when the narrative of home and family was so strong?<sup>52</sup> For both American and Australian women the growth of the professions was crucial, providing both impetus and jobs for the growing numbers of female students. As education systems expanded post-World War II the need for school teachers would shape the job patterns of the vast majority of women who graduated in arts and science.

## The best of all possible worlds: a transitional generation?

It is this age group [women born during the Great Depression and the 1940s] of women that Bardwick (1980) predicted would be living in the best of all possible worlds in the 1980s.<sup>53</sup>

Clearly women were entering colleges and universities in increasing numbers and were using that education in full-time and part-time employment in unprecedented ways. As we have seen, various authors declared the cohort of educated women born in the 1930s and 40s a transitional generation. They were pioneering the combination of marriage and paid work, albeit at differing stages of their life course. Bardwick went so far as to predict that they would be living in the best of all possible worlds by the 1980s. Could this really be so?

Drawing on a range of longitudinal studies Giele spelt out the nature of their innovation. Although this middle group (those born in the 1930s and 40s) grew up expecting to play traditional roles as home-

51 Katy Richmond, 'The workforce participation of married women in Australia' in Donald E. Edgar (ed.), *Social change in Australia*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1974, p. 269.

52 Mackinnon and Gregory, 'A study corner in the kitchen'.

53 Giele, 'Women's role change and adaptation', p. 50.

makers and volunteers, she argued, they actually established a new, multiple-role pattern – which combined marriage, motherhood, paid work and sometimes continuing education – while they were still in their middle to late thirties.<sup>54</sup> Mary Goldsmith’s life presents a case in point. They were the first to show ever-higher employment rates from age twenty onwards, Giele claimed. They ‘were pivotal in the shift towards multiple roles’.<sup>55</sup> ‘When they were just twenty-nine or thirty years old’, she continued, ‘a remarkable number of them were combining motherhood with employment and graduate school’.<sup>56</sup> This combination clearly led them into both conflict with the reigning ideology of suburban motherhood and to consider new ways of being in the world. Some escaped that ideology by coming from immigrant families that subverted the ideology. An Australian lawyer noted that her family had supported her paid work:

again being middle Europeans, mothering wasn’t a big thing for them, they were rather sophisticated Viennese. In Vienna the middle classes had nannies and help in the house and all that sort of thing so they couldn’t see why I couldn’t just get someone to look after the children and go back to work.<sup>57</sup>

But that view was unusual.

### *Being transitional*

I was one of that cohort, on my way to becoming a high school teacher, happy to fit my working life around that of my husband, a young medical consultant in training. After my arts degree I studied for a Diploma in Education like so many of my peers. I taught in a country high school for two years then married at the age of 23. In common with others of the Pill generation I postponed children, teaching for another two years. After our first child was born we moved to

54 p. 42.

55 p. 43.

56 p. 45.

57 Interview with law graduate for ‘Graduating in the fifties’ project.

another city for my husband's graduate work. There I started working towards a Master's degree as much for company and stimulation in a new environment as for any career motivation. A second son followed, then travel to pursue my husband's career in the UK and, eventually, the US where son number three was born. I began to crave stimulating work but being without the requisite US visa I opted for voluntary work instead. Return to Australia saw me back at work on my Master's degree with, by that stage, a keen motivation, fanned by the emerging literature of the women's movement. I was thirty-two, a little older than Giele's exemplar, but every bit as enthusiastic to live life differently. The offer of an academic position (at the lowest level) was the stimulus I needed to become one of the transitionals. I was the mother of three children, wife of an increasingly successful professional husband, graduate student (part-time) and university teacher (full-time) in an education faculty. How much of this was serendipity, how much due to the times? Can I take credit for any achievement or was I in the right place at the right time? As I read about this period I recognize myself.

Yohalem described highly qualified women renewing their ties to work through former employees and colleagues. My offer came from a professor who taught one of my master's courses. University numbers were expanding and faculty were needed, particularly in 'female' professions such as education. I combined both the patterns of those who did not have continuous employment careers (I spent seven years out of the workforce) and those who did, eventually building a strong professional career. Perhaps this was only possible in Australia at that time when an academic position could be won without a completed doctoral degree. That degree had to be finished later, part time, an exhausting challenge with a full-time career and three children. Giele named Mary Catherine Bateson's philosophy, expressed in the title of her book *Composing a life* as 'the leading ideology of her cohort'.<sup>58</sup> Was I composing a life? It felt like barely managed chaos at the time.

58 Giele, 'Women's role change and adaptation', p. 47; Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a life*, Atlantic Monthly Press, New York, 1989.

The challenge for Bateson and for others was to integrate family and career, to achieve in both 'without having to sacrifice one for the other'.<sup>59</sup> I ask myself: Did I achieve that balance? Perhaps I was living in 'the best of all possible worlds', living at a time when opportunities were opening up, while there was still time to pursue further education and garner experience. The circumstances that drew many young professional women into the buoyant labour market in the 1970s and early '80s have changed irrevocably. Many doors have closed. It is difficult for young women to gain the experience they need to break into the job market and to combine that with family life. The transition my generation lived out has not yet resulted in the new world we dreamed of.

*Composing a life: family and individual in transition*

The first generation of women who graduated from universities and colleges in the English-speaking world frequently had to decide between marriage and career, between love and freedom.<sup>60</sup> A brave few managed to combine both, usually because of a very secure economic position, a shared commitment to a profession such as medicine, or a rare case of a supremely brave and often iconoclastic individual with strong financial support. That tension has been of continuing interest to psychologists who use the language of 'role' conflict rather than terms such as love and freedom. They ask 'in what way and under what circumstances is sex role ideology associated with choice and planned action?'<sup>61</sup> This has frequently translated into discussions of psychologically inflected 'role conflict' as we have seen (Chapter 1). Can women become the agents of their own destiny in the light of predominant sex role understandings?

59 Giele, 'Women's role change and adaptation', p. 47.

60 Mackinnon, *Love and freedom*.

61 Jean Lipman-Blumen and Ann R. Tickamyer, 'Sex roles in transition: a ten year perspective', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 1, 1975, 297-337.

Such a question took on a renewed urgency in the 1950s and early 60s when sex 'roles' were both more sharply defined and yet facing challenge. Giele identified a similar subtheme of autonomy and dependency in her overview of several studies of women graduates. The pervasiveness of understandings of women's role directly prevented some women from taking paid work, even in roles for which they were seen to be suited. One woman related the story of an influential kindergarten advisor:

Now her policy was that in the 50s she would not employ any teacher or pre-school assistant who had a child under the age of five; that was her policy and you could call that discrimination now ... but it was her firm belief that children under five needed a parent at home so that was the 50s.<sup>62</sup>

Those who draw on life course studies of women graduates throughout the twentieth century claim that a caring, family-oriented set of values has diminished, giving way to a more individualistic focus on achievement and equality.<sup>63</sup> The cohort of UCLA graduates of the late '50s was oriented towards finding a balance between the agentic and communal aspects of life and felt at the age of forty-six that they had achieved it.<sup>64</sup> Giele believed the transitional women of the 1930s and 1940s (that is, born in those decades) were 'clearest in their emphasis on a balanced life'. 'The pioneers in multiple roles', Giele declared, 'came into their own'.<sup>65</sup> But that balance came at a cost, usually to the woman, who kept her career aspirations in check.

Are 'women who have juggled multiple roles ... psychically and psychologically healthier at midlife' as Hulbert asked?<sup>66</sup> She maintained that they were. Perhaps like one Australian graduate they 'just got on with it'. Another summed it up: 'I used to get terribly tired and sometimes quite frustrated because I'd be tired and there'd be a lot I

62 Interview for 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

63 See for instance Ulrich Beck, *Risk society: towards a new modernity*, Sage, London, 1992.

64 Giele, 'Women's role change and adaptation', p. 53.

65 p. 54.

66 Hulbert, 'Reflections on the lives of educated women', p. 434.

wanted to do and, I mean, that's life isn't it really?'<sup>67</sup> The Radcliffe class of '64 confirmed Hulbert's view. The authors claimed that their findings supported many other studies showing that women with multiple role involvements (family, career) 'may actually be better off at mid life'.<sup>68</sup> The desired balance was certainly not easy and women struggled to attain it. Nor did everyone have the courage, or perhaps the strong constitution, to break free of expected patterns.

Mary Goldsmith reflected on her choices:

Q: I think many people who have had a higher education did go somewhat against the grain.

Mary: Well I think I did as a matter of fact. I remember we had lunch with a couple of school friends of mine the other day and they were saying how they couldn't do this and they couldn't do that. And they couldn't leave home and they couldn't do the other. And I finally said, but I did that. And they said, but that was you, though. But they couldn't. Although they wanted to, neither of them could.

Jill Ker realized she was different when she chose her studies over the demands of a lover:

Then, when the last possible moment came for preparation for examinations I simply disappeared to study and refused all invitations. This incomprehensible conduct produced many storms which left me feeling guilty about studying, a new and startling experience ... When presented with the conflict, there was no question of which side I would finally come down. Studying history was more important than the strongest infatuation. I knew this was not the way women were supposed to be, but I couldn't change my deepest motivations.<sup>69</sup>

Some did live in the best of all possible worlds, thankful to have had a career at all rather than concerned whether that career was equal to that of a man. After all, their undergraduate education had not explic-

67 Interview for 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

68 Abigail J. Stewart and Elizabeth A. Vandewater, 'The Radcliffe class of 1964: career and family social clock projects in a transitional cohort' in Hulbert and Schuster, *Women's lives through time*, p. 256.

69 Conway, *The road from Coorain*, p. 181.

itly prepared them for a career: it was a ‘climate of unexpectation’.<sup>70</sup> The lack of career counselling available to women at college or university in the 1950s and early 60s was legendary and is a frequent theme in interviews and memoirs.

‘I didn’t know how to go about finding out, really, what possibilities there were with art courses. We had no career nights of any sort back then’. Worse, any advice given often served to narrow women’s options:

I wanted to do science because engineering was not considered the thing for girls. But the school and the university said girls doing science should do biology. And I said I don’t like biology. And they said, well the average life of a female scientist is only 3.9 years. You’ve got to do biology.<sup>71</sup>

‘I remember being asked to raise hands in class about what we wanted to do’, another reflected, ‘and I remember saying physiotherapy because I thought it was a pretty word’.<sup>72</sup>

### *Out of sync with the social clock*

What did it mean to be a young adult woman, highly educated at a private women’s college in the United States, then reaching adulthood in the turbulent years of the 1960s? Ravenna Helson’s review of Mills College graduates of the classes of 1958 and 1960 provides another part of the story. The longitudinal study was originally ‘an investigation of creativity, leadership and outlook towards the future in “modern” young women’.<sup>73</sup> Helson noted that, although the interest in creativity continues, the Mills study since 1980 has focused on the individual in society over time and on women’s adult development.<sup>74</sup> It is

70 Linda Eisenmann, ‘Weathering “a climate of unexpectation”’: gender equity and the Radcliffe Institute, 1960–1995’, *Academe*, 81(4), 1995, pp. 21–25.

71 Interview for ‘Graduating in the fifties’ project.

72 Interview for ‘Graduating in the fifties’ project.

73 Helson, ‘The Mills classes of 1958 and 1960’, p. 190.

74 Ibid.

centrally concerned with the understanding of personality, the attribute par excellence of the time.

This multifaceted investigation, which surveyed the classes of 1958 and 1960 in their mid-twenties, their early forties, and their early fifties, opens a window into the changes in educated women's lives over the life span. It offers the possibility of linking their individual lives to wider social change. Some of Helson's conclusions are startling, particularly the discrepancy between expectation and actualities, supporting the notion of this group as a transitional generation. For instance, as seniors in college the Mills women said that they wanted an average of 3.5 children, most commonly four. Yet by their early forties they had an average of 1.7 children and one quarter had none at all.<sup>75</sup> This finding parallels my Australian survey, where 64 per cent of respondents envisaged an ideal number of children, up to 50 per cent nominating four children as the ideal. In fact the actual completed family size diverged for half the participants: the average completed family size of the sample was 2.7.

Helson used the concept of the social clock as a tool to measure change. The social clock was described to the women as 'a set of socially approved age norms superimposed on the biological clock (chronological age)'.<sup>76</sup> Here we can see a link with Graham's notion, discussed earlier, of an exemption from the 'norms' conferred by varying levels of education. Helson asked her respondents to consider how their lives had diverged from the social clock. Over three quarters of the women in the survey felt that their lives had deviated in significant respects.

Here again is a transitional generation, a pivotal generation in Sicherman's terms. Some (22 per cent) cited not getting married or having children as a deviation from the social clock, another 22 per cent spoke of marrying late or having children late as a deviation, 10 per cent listed divorce and others spoke of taking up alternative lifestyles or returning to study in their thirties as a break with the social

75 p. 197.

76 p. 205. See also Stewart and Vandewater, 'The Radcliffe class of 1964' on the usefulness of 'the social clock'.

clock. In fact less than a quarter (22 per cent) felt that their lives had *not* differed from expectations. Were they perhaps setting a new social clock for later generations to follow? Helson sees these data as evidence that the classes of 1958 and 1960 'have lived lives of considerable challenge in terms of adjustment'.<sup>77</sup> The reasons for this challenge are the subject of another chapter but it is significant that the respondents themselves mentioned feminism or the women's movement as social influences most often, with civil rights and racial integration the next most important.<sup>78</sup>

*The old image is competing with the new*

There was a particular rupture for the Mills women around age thirty: an 'age thirty transition', Helson called it. It came at a time when most of the women were involved in marriage, childbearing or work. Many women reported feelings of depression, resentment and incompetence. Helson interpreted this finding to indicate that 'many members of the sample were caught between two life structures – that they had rejected the old and not yet envisioned or solidified the new'.<sup>79</sup> Dawson used similar terms in her study of Sydney graduates: 'the old image of women is competing with the new, old values with new values ... they have no script to follow in working out a life pattern'.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore that time came for the Mills class of 1958 and 1960 in the late '60s, when motherhood was not as highly valued as before and the women's movement was leading to a renegotiation of relations between men and women, husbands and wives.

Was this 'age thirty transition' peculiar to the graduates of Mills College, a private college where young women were socialized to become confident, competent and independent young women? Or was it common to the cohort of late 1950s graduates or even early and mid

77 p. 205.

78 p. 206.

79 p. 201.

80 Dawson, *Graduate and married*, p. 221.

1950s graduates? It appears to have been far more common particularly amongst highly educated young women in many parts of the world who had experienced a sense of competence at university or at work and were then confronted by the frustrations – and joys – of young motherhood. An Australian interview suggests that the age thirty transition was not specific to the US and Mills College:

I got very bored being a wife so I then went back to work in Sydney with a public solicitor and then I got pregnant, and I had three children in three and a half years ... and trying to practice in between, not very successfully, but sort of trying to get away from that sort of terribly bored [and] trapped feeling. And I was getting unhappier and unhappier, putting on more and more weight too.<sup>81</sup>

Such unhappiness and resentment may also have resulted from the high level of psychological awareness of a generation of young women schooled in psychology, child development and the need for adjustment, whose expectations of themselves were much higher than that of a previous generation. They were *supposed* to feel fulfilled in their mothering role, in their sacrifice of their ambitions to those of their husbands; they were meant to accept the notion of a ‘reflected identity’<sup>82</sup> but the reality was often a bitter alternative. A sense of that reflected identity comes through the recollections of Alison Prentice on her marriage at the grand old age of 25:

I did have a scholarly, intellectual bent and as soon as I met somebody like Jim who was connected with the university that was it. I married a university professor to get into the university and I had no idea consciously that that was what I was doing, but everyone else who came along got discarded or rejected or it didn’t work out.<sup>83</sup>

Another major discrepancy between expectation and reality occurred in relation to workforce participation. Only 20 per cent of the Mills seniors expected ‘to work always, or unless work interferes with fam-

81 Interview for ‘Graduating in the fifties’ project.

82 Helson, ‘The Mills classes of 1958 and 1960’, p. 202.

83 Interview with Alison Prentice, ‘Graduating in the fifties’ project.

ily'.<sup>84</sup> Helson found, however, that 'one third of the sample was heavily involved in the world of work at age thirty-two, almost two thirds were heavily involved at age forty-two and in 1981 almost two thirds of the sample – now in their forties – felt a bit defensive if they were not in the labor force'.<sup>85</sup> Similarly only 5 per cent of Dawson's Sydney women graduates had expected to combine a particular degree with marriage. However she found that in fact 41 per cent were combining career with marriage, a testament to both the power of their education and changing social norms.<sup>86</sup> For this generation then the expected traditional life of housewife and mother, with perhaps a strong voluntary role in the community, had given way to the multiple roles of Giele's study, and the issues that came with it.

Students from another elite women's college at a similar period (Vassar classes of 1957 and 1958) were divided into two groups on the basis of faculty nominating them, or not nominating them, as 'ideal students'.<sup>87</sup> The criteria listed for the nominated ideal students are as much a window into the ways in which male and female students were viewed, of the psychological categories enlisted in the late 1950s to assess personality, as of the students themselves. Those nominated by faculty as ideal were found to have

a good credit ratio, were high on the admissions criteria but were not necessarily top candidates, had high social maturity, showed a moderate amount of impulse expression, were low on measures of repression and suppression, achieved high development status as seniors, were low on conformity into the student peer culture, had adequate self confidence, were *mildly dominating, tended towards masculine interests*, and were low on authoritarian tendencies both personally and on sociopolitical issues.<sup>88</sup>

The tendency to masculine interests is intriguing. What did this mean? Were these students more 'achievement oriented', less inter-

84 Helson, 'The Mills classes of 1958 and 1960', p. 194.

85 p. 203.

86 Dawson, *Graduate and married*, p. 123.

87 Brown and Pacini, 'The Vassar classes of 1957 and 1958', p. 163.

88 p. 168, emphasis added.

ested in stereotypical feminine pursuits? The description of the Vassar College Attitude Inventory (VCAI) scales elaborates: ‘high scorers endorse interests and attitudes characteristic of men in our culture: low scorers show conventionally feminine characteristics such as passivity and acquiescence’.<sup>89</sup> Aha! Presumably the tendency to masculine interests was manifest in more active, independent behaviour.

On self-report this group could also be characterized as having an ‘acceptance of the theoretical and the abstract as worthwhile’.<sup>90</sup> Could that be part of the tendency towards masculinity? Given that higher education had been initially established for men, was a perceived tendency to the abstract, to masculinity, as well as being ‘mildly dominating’ an advantage, even in a college established for women? Years later one Vassar ‘nominee’ seems to endorse that view, summing up the causes of her changing political opinion as: ‘achievement of genuine psychological independence, an ability to think analytically and critically, nurtured by majoring in philosophy at Vassar’.<sup>91</sup> Did one necessarily become an achiever at the expense of one’s femininity?

An Australian physicist, whose mother had been a maths teacher, worked in the area of rocket science. She felt that in the fifties science created good career paths: there was a great shortage of physicists and mathematicians. After her PhD she won a Royal Society of the Exhibition of 1851 scholarship for science research to University College London. There she was the only professional woman in her department. After marriage and two children, and a return to Australia, she began working part time as a university lecturer, moving to full-time work when the children reached school age. She clearly had a strong ‘acceptance of the theoretical and the abstract as worthwhile’. And she was not prey to the ideology of the perfect female: ‘nearly all my friends were boys ... most of my friends were male’. At the same time she felt no threat to her femininity, nor any need to engage in the

89 p. 164.

90 p. 168.

91 p. 182.

women's movement when it arrived: 'my mother was a feminist. It was something I grew up with, yes'.<sup>92</sup> Some refused to fit the categories.

The two Vassar groups, those nominated as ideal students and those not nominated (what a fate!) were further subdivided according to high academic ranking or lower rank. Follow-up of the two groups over several decades (the last iteration of the study took place in 1991) revealed some interesting differences. The 'nominated' group had shown consistent dedication to their careers whereas the 'non-nominated' group were constant in their attention to relationships, and were more traditional and family-oriented.<sup>93</sup> Curiously the non-nominated group were deemed happier in later life, and had a stronger sense of well-being, of acceptance of self, than the nominated group.

All the Vassar women had expected to follow the normative pattern of a stable marriage, not surprising for their time, and the vast majority did marry. For those who did not (the single, the multiply married and the divorced) the single and divorced women were more likely than the married or remarried women to have had continuous full-time careers and to prioritize their careers highly.<sup>94</sup>

At ages fifty-five and six the Vassar women 'were leading happy productive lives, busy in careers or voluntary work'.<sup>95</sup> Many had chalked up considerable achievements. Significantly there was little or no evidence of menopausal problems, midlife crisis or 'empty nest' distress. In general: 'they reported feelings of high morale, self-esteem and well being'.<sup>96</sup> Like the Mills College women they saw as the major personal influences on their lives the women's movement, and the civil rights and environmental movements.

Speaking of their subjects Brown and Pacini used the now familiar words: 'They seemed to get the best of both worlds'.<sup>97</sup> Using another image typical of this cohort the authors described the Vassar

92 Interview for 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

93 Brown and Pacini, 'The Vassar classes of 1957 and 1958', p. 184.

94 p. 185.

95 p. 186.

96 Ibid.

97 p. 187.

classes of 1957 and '58 as 'bridging the generations, finding themselves in between their children and their own parents'.<sup>98</sup> It was clear to many who lived through it that this generation represented a particular turning point, some naming themselves as 'the swing bridge generation' linking the traditionalism of parents with the more liberated generation that followed.

The Wellesley record book that celebrated the fortieth reunion of the graduating class of 1960 claimed a special reason for the importance its classes of '59 and '60. The class of '59 sponsored an extensive survey, 'which found that '59 – hence '60 as well – is the pivotal point of a shift between those whose post-graduation careers put marriage and family first (at least chronologically) and those who started to establish a professional career prior to starting marriage and family'.<sup>99</sup> The Wellesley investigators, recognizing the multiple possibilities for their alumnae, asked them whether they had chosen to move *with* or *against* the grain of the time, a very telling metaphor around which alumnae grouped their stories. Here too was recognition of the transitional generation.

But was it the best of all possible worlds and did such terms apply only to those who attended the elite women's colleges of the United States, who tended to study their students and alumnae extensively? There are several sources for comparison with Australian women as we have seen, both through the many surveys of the period<sup>100</sup> and through my own extensive research with graduates of the universities of Melbourne and Adelaide. These large public institutions were co-educational and located in major cities, unlike many of the elite women's colleges of the US. A few women (20 per cent in Dawson's

98 Ibid.

99 Judy Huggins Balfe, 'Introduction' in Wellesley 1960 40th Reunion, *Record Book*, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA, 2000. I am grateful to Judy Grace for bringing this issue to my attention.

100 E.g. Dawson, *Graduate and married*; Meg Rorke with Fred Schonnell and I.G. Meddleton, *The vocational contribution of women graduates of the University of Queensland*, Research Publication no. 6, Faculty of Education, University of Queensland, 1958, Noel Butlin Archives Centre, ANU, Canberra.

Sydney study) lived in university college accommodation, enjoying the women-only community that this offered. They too were constrained by the disciplinary rules that characterized so many institutions for women. But they also attended classes with men on the university campus. Many more lived at home or in lodgings. Their experience then was similar in many ways to the women who attended the large state universities in the United States, such as the University of Michigan or the University of Texas at Austin. Yet when we turn to their stories of university life and its aftermath the differences between institutions fade.

Studies of University of Michigan women of the class of 1967, while not quite fitting the period of this book – they were after all ‘the quintessential members of that turbulent cohort called the 1960s generation’,<sup>101</sup> ‘the leading edge of the baby boom’,<sup>102</sup> – are helpful for comparison. There too women were extensively studied, most notably through Matina Horner’s well-known research on women’s motives for avoiding success conducted in the mid-1960s.<sup>103</sup> There too researchers found women experiencing both the traditional expectations of ‘marriage, motherhood and successful husbands by whom we could be defined’ and for many a harsh realization that younger women and the impact of women’s liberation were totally rewriting the script, urging them to redefine themselves as independent. ‘I’m a survivor’, wrote one, ‘proud of it, and no doubt not the only woman my age who’s had to shift gears. We’re the ones, I think, who really do have it all!’<sup>104</sup>

In Australia Madge Dawson’s study of married women graduates of the University of Sydney was a response to the fact that although Australian educated women had been ‘the subject of comment they

101 Sandra Tangri and Sharon Rae Jenkins, ‘The University of Michigan class of 1967: the women’s life paths study’ in Hulbert and Schuster, *Women’s lives through time*, p. 259.

102 p. 263.

103 Horner, ‘Towards an understanding of achievement-related conflicts in women’, cited in Tangri and Jenkins, ‘The University of Michigan class of 1967’, p. 261.

104 p. 281.

had not been the subject of serious study'.<sup>105</sup> Many conclusions reveal Australian women to be facing the same issues as their American sisters. Most, for instance, attended university to prepare for a career, others to seek a broader culture or from intellectual interests. There were however some other issues that were specific to Australia. Dawson recorded that the proportion of women students coming from private secondary schools rose from the earliest days (i.e. from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) and the state high school proportion fell. This is a key aspect of a particularly Australian concern with the social origins of its students, one that may not have as much salience in the US where private secondary schools do not play such a major part.

Looking at married women graduates' family formation over the twentieth century Dawson claimed that a trend towards earlier marriage was clear, paralleling that of the population at large.<sup>106</sup> Yet graduates never married quite as early as the norm. In 1966 the median age at first marriage for Australian women with degrees was 24.4, a year and a third later than the average age of those who had completed high school.<sup>107</sup> They bore their children later and had smaller families. In this sense their social clock was set a little later than most, both harking back to an earlier period and pointing the way forward. Women graduates increasingly married professional men (largely teachers and doctors), and their marriages were 'more durable': fewer were widowed or divorced than women in the wider population at similar ages.

Religion played a strong part in the study. Dawson found women of Roman Catholic faith to be clearly underrepresented in university ranks. Jewish women, on the other hand, were overrepresented in rela-

105 Dawson, *Graduate and married*, p. xii.

106 Dawson, *Graduate and married*.

107 P.F. McDonald, 'Marriage in Australia: age at first marriage and proportions marrying, 1860-1971', Australian Family Formation Project Monograph No. 2, Department of Demography, Australian National University, Canberra, 1974, p. 214.

tion to their numbers in the wider population.<sup>108</sup> One Jewish graduate employed a novel explanation for this fact:

With Jewish women I think it's a cultural thing [citing a book] ... one of the theories she puts forward is that for thousands of years the elite thing amongst Jews was for the men to study so that the women earned a living and ran the businesses. And they were mainly trades people and merchants ... and so to succeed you have to be quite pushy, and so the culture, especially in Europe in the little towns, and the women were the movers and shakers, although they didn't have the elite [habit] of praying and studying which was for the men.<sup>109</sup>

This woman joked about wanting to be tall and blonde and the ambivalence of trying to be a docile, desirable 50s women and a 'pushy' Jewish girl.

Interestingly Dawson found that many women reported a decline in their faith, or at least their observance, after their university study. The decline in religious affiliation was greater in those with honours degrees than in pass students<sup>110</sup> prompting Dawson to speculate about how far university education is responsible for the decline in religious belief. An American student at UCLA felt that she could date the exact moment of her apostasy. It occurred in a particular first-year philosophy lecture on western rational thought and the history of secular humanism: 'Descartes' argument that free will proceeds from the rational mind dealt the final blow to my Lutheran beliefs'.<sup>111</sup>

108 Dawson, *Graduate and married*, p. 61.

109 Interview for 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

110 Dawson, *Graduate and married*, p. 65.

111 Banner, *Finding Fran*, p. 111. But there were many who found a great sense of spiritual and social community in religious organizations. See, for instance, Howe, *A century of influence*.

## The best of times – or the worst?

The graduate cohort of the 1950s and early 60s was a transitional generation, a pivotal group, a swing bridge between the traditionalists and the liberationists without a doubt. Studies of the cohort itself, and others comparing it with earlier cohorts, all tend to support the transitional nature of the classes of the 1950s and early 60s. But it is another matter to see that generation as having the best of all possible worlds, except perhaps in retrospect. It rarely felt like it at the time for the women who led the way. It was particularly hard for those who tried to cross the barriers into academic work, a male bastion in both Australia and the US. Women might become tutors in universities as Mary Goldsmith had but the next step to a permanent post in a research university was harder to achieve in both Australia and the US.<sup>112</sup> It certainly did not feel like ‘the best’ for one woman making her way in a science faculty. Although she never married the prospect of marriage shaped her career just as surely as if she had.

### *Not knowing how to play the game*

Helen,<sup>113</sup> an eldest daughter of an Australian family, attended a well-established university, encouraged strongly by her mother, who had been denied higher education. Helen studied for a science degree, choosing a biological stream as was appropriate for a woman who had been discouraged as a girl at high school from an intensive study of physics and chemistry. During her final (senior) year Helen attempted to secure a position with a major scientific agency in her field but was dissuaded by the man who headed the section: it would be ‘a waste of time training a woman who would quit after a few years’.<sup>114</sup> However,

112 See Rossiter, *Women scientists in America*, for a full account of women in science during this period.

113 Not her real name.

114 Interview for ‘Graduating in the fifties’ project.

as she performed well in her exams Helen was offered a post as demonstrator in her university department. She was to complete a masters degree part time over 5 years. Thus began a satisfying career in science which included travel to overseas research laboratories where she mixed with internationally famous scientists, enjoyed an American exchange, worked with stimulating colleagues and engaged in cutting edge research. But there was little academic progress.

Helen was delighted with her post at first, flattered as many women were to have been appointed (that climate of unexpectation?). But, she claimed, 'little did I realize how long I would be at the bottom of the pile, while men – if appointed to low rank – would hold it for just one year before being appointed lecturer'. On her return from the US Helen was made a senior demonstrator, a minor post in an Australian university, one seldom held by men. It did not include the entitlement to sabbatical leave that higher posts did. There she remained for 11 years, finally gaining tenure as a lecturer, usually the base point for Australian male academic careers.

While she finally enjoyed a sabbatical year Helen was rarely supported financially for her trips to conferences and other laboratories as colleagues were. In retrospect she felt she gave more time to the department than many of her male colleagues, acting in key positions (usually unrewarded) for scientific congresses. Now, looking back, she feels she had no mentors or role models: she 'did not know how to play the game to my advantage' and felt that 'networking was not a female pursuit at the time'. The offer of early retirement was a final indignity for Helen, who lost her last study leave. 'It was explained to me that it would not be financially to my benefit to work out my time until I was 65. I continued to work just until the end of the year (trapped into marking exam papers)'. She was upset to hear a male colleague who had benefited from her taking his classes say, 'You won't catch me doing that when I retire'.

Dawson noted that more than one fifth of the Sydney women over 64 were still working. Perhaps they were making up for lost time.<sup>115</sup>

115 See also Yohalem, *The careers of professional women*.

Helen, it seems, was precipitated out of the university with about as little sense of autonomy as she had entered it. But any feeling of flattery had long given way to a degree of bitterness, a feeling that she had given more than her ‘pint of blood’, as she put it. Helen did not consider herself initially a ‘career women’ but ‘in not marrying, that is effectively what I became’. Later she described herself as literally ‘married to the university’, a fairly unsatisfactory spouse we might conclude.

Science did not offer a warmer welcome to young American graduates as Margaret Rossiter has shown – the ‘golden age of science’ was in fact ‘a very dark age for women’.<sup>116</sup> As American colleges and universities ramped up their research efforts in the period from 1945 to 1972, one of record growth and affluence in the sector, and of well recognized ‘manpower’ needs, forces acted against women’s inclusion in the expanding scientific and academic workforces. Anti-nepotism laws worked against women’s employment. Men were frequently preferred for continuing posts, as they were deemed to be more reliable in their commitment. The urgency to staff new universities and colleges with research-ready faculty led to a preference for those with PhDs. As small US institutions remade themselves as state universities some of the older long-serving women staff were made to feel unwelcome and undervalued. ‘The best many such women could do’, Rossiter argued, ‘was to retire as soon as possible, hurt, confused and angry that they were being so hastily and unceremoniously cast aside’.<sup>117</sup> Young women heard that message: the profile of Radcliffe student Bebe Mensch noted that she was a chemistry major. ‘However’, the profile continued,

after her graduation, science will become no more than a hobby in her life. Because of low pay and meager opportunities in the chemistry field she hopes to enter the executive training program of a NY dept store and prove her theory that retail and merchandising is a good field for women.<sup>118</sup>

116 Rossiter, *Women scientists in America*, p 123.

117 p. 191.

118 *The Radcliffe News*, 13 January 1950, p. 2.

*Not whether ... but how*

Institutional support for women is critical, as Linda Eisenmann has argued<sup>119</sup> and Helen's story underlines. The American Association of University Women (AAUW) was determined to provide support to women through a fellowship scheme instituted to help professional women continue their careers. The question for the association was 'no longer whether to marry, but rather how best the married scholar can combine the responsibilities of professional and family life'.<sup>120</sup> An article titled 'Not whether ... but how' traced the careers of two former married fellows to see how they had fared. Virginia Beaver (now Mrs Grover Platt [sic]), Margaret Snell Fellowship recipient, followed her doctorate in history with 'hunting for evidence of colonial smuggling in out-of-the-way places, in old merchant account books and other shipping records'. Beaver, the article proudly noted, was now an associate professor at Bowling Green University, Ohio, where she taught American history and her husband, a professor, taught European history.<sup>121</sup> A photograph portrays the archetypal academic [and fifties] family: husband, wife and two children, daughters Carolyn and Phyllis. The article explained 'how' Virginia Beaver managed to save time and simplify living to run her busy life: 'I try to buy clothes for the girls that require a minimum of ironing and I keep our meals as simple as possible, and use time-savers in preparing them'.

We do not learn whether Beaver, like many Australian women with degrees, had outside help. Dawson found that the Australian high income group (which would certainly include couples like Beaver and her academic husband) 'had 60 percent of all paid help', 'giving no support to the view so often heard that Australian women do not have domestic help'.<sup>122</sup> Mary Goldsmith too mentioned household help when she was teaching at universities. This issue remains hidden here

119 Linda Eisenmann, 'Befuddling the "feminine mystique": academic women and the creation of the Radcliffe Institute', *Education Foundations*, 10, 1996, pp. 5–26.

120 'Not whether ... but how', *Journal of the AAUW*, 48(2), 1955, p. 91.

121 Ibid.

122 Dawson, *Graduate and married*, p. 49.

as Beaver expounded her working patterns: 'intensive studying, library work and preparation for classes are left until after the girls are in bed at night; and she and her husband try to reserve the hours between four and seven for family activities'.<sup>123</sup> Nevertheless, it was difficult and Beaver admitted that at times 'you get a feeling that you're not doing justice to your children'. The AAUW journalist was at pains to dispel those feelings of guilt (role conflict?). 'But since their mother is with them almost all the hours that they are not in school and seldom accepts an invitation for a week-night, such doubts can have little basis in reality'.<sup>124</sup>

Another former fellow featured in the article, Mary Hohiesel, also an associate professor, the mother of two children and wife of a professor, believed that success in combining marriage and career depends on 'a lot of compromising and a certain amount of humour'.<sup>125</sup> She had a husband who 'digs in and helps', a daughter who made her own school lunch, 'adequate household help' and 'that important extra ingredient', good health.<sup>126</sup> Here then were two good models for the pattern of combining marriage and career that would have appealed to the many graduate readers of the journal. The availability of fellowships, the moral support and role modelling involved, was a key factor in maintaining a professional identity for many highly educated US women. Such support might have made a huge difference to Helen's professional career. Strikingly both AAUW fellowship holders were arts graduates, a historian and an anthropologist.

Jill Ker, contemplating her marriage to Canadian academic John Conway, also thought about the 'how' of career and marriage:

I was too interested in a career to fit the going style of male/female pairings. I didn't want to become the typical Cambridge-style wife – superbly educated, somebody else's muse – much admired for her conversation and her excellent, crusty, homemade bread ... We were not seeking a merging of identities in the

123 'Not whether ... but how', p. 92.

124 Ibid.

125 Ibid.

126 Ibid.

romantic mode, but an enhancement of each identity, through access to the other's broader experience.<sup>127</sup>

Jill Ker had also benefited from a Harvard fellowship, as had Charlotte Painter, later a writer whose works questioned issues around motherhood. Painter's well-received book, *Who made the lamb: confession from a Malaga madhouse*, which questioned woman's role as mother, was compared with Kesey's *One flew over the cuckoo's nest*.

Painter corresponded with several of the well-known women writers of the time. A letter of appreciation from Adrienne Rich on the publication of one of Painter's works contains a striking image of women at home writing in the earlier pre-women's movement days as women in house arrest.<sup>128</sup>

'Being someone's else's muse', 'in house arrest': these images suggested that at least at that stage the 'best of all possible worlds' had not been achieved. But Bardwick predicted that the women born in the 1930s and 40s would be in that happy situation *in the 1980s* and highly educated women such as 'Helen', Jill Ker Conway, 'Mary Goldsmith', Virginia Beaver and Charlotte Painter were all in varied ways helping to create that next world, that bridge for younger women to cross.

In this chapter we have seen that the cohort of the 1950s and early 60s was indeed a transitional group, pioneering multiple roles as mothers, career women, graduate students, on a large scale and entering the workforce as married women in unprecedented numbers. Were they also the proto-feminists who ignited the sparks for the renewed women's movement of the late 1960s and 70s? In the next chapter we look at educated women graduates of the 1950s and early 60s and their attitudes to women's place, to motherhood, and their participation in, their creation of, and in some cases their rejection of, the movement that was to shape the next generation.

127 Conway, *True north*, pp. 72, 87.

128 Charlotte Painter papers, 1 January 1977, Special Collections, Stanford University.

## 5 From *Mademoiselle* to *Ms* magazine: mainstreamers, continuity and premature liberationists

Others are catching up with my way of life.<sup>1</sup>

No other single generation of women had its personal foundation so thoroughly jolted.<sup>2</sup>

There is sure to be a reaction which will emphasize once again that women are persons.<sup>3</sup>

Young college women of the 1950s and early 1960s began to sow the seeds of political action that the women's liberation movement would reap. The path was not always clear, however: the first steps hesitant. Interest did not initially focus on women. Political activity appeared dormant but issues such as civil rights, anti-apartheid, nuclear disarmament and a concern for peace animated many young people. Susan Borman Delattre, at Stanford in the mid-fifties, wrote to her parents on the nuclear issue: 'This is the crucial issue of my generation, and of your generation. You must save yourselves and we must save our children, and together we must stop the world from panicked self-destruction.'<sup>4</sup> Borman was involved in an anti-nuclear demonstration, a 'very orderly rational demonstration' and wrote a paper against nuclear proliferation. These were vital issues for many in 1957 when the Russians launched their Sputnik and the ensuing space race seemed doomed to end in Armageddon. Borman's interests ran the gamut of

1 Yohalem, *The careers of professional women*, p. 180.

2 Howatt, 'Straddling two worlds (or) thank god we knew how to post', p. 11.

3 Marine Leland, letter to A.A. Cutler, 9 December 1953, in *Miscellaneous Correspondence*, Leland Collection, College Archives, Smith College.

4 Susan Borman Delattre papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University.

mid-fifties concerns and included idealism, pacifism, civil rights and, distinctively, Quakerism. She was very much of her times, often alluding to the popular culture of the era: listening to Odetta and Theodore Bikel, seeing New Wave films such as *Les quatre cents coups*. She read widely: Jung, Freud, Santayana and the transcendentalists. This was the time when at the University of Tasmania Suzanne Kemp ‘devoured works by the French existentialists – Camus, Sartre and de Beauvoir’, that Jill Ker Conway in Sydney discovered Jung.

At Melbourne University Wendy Poussard sought inspiration through her reading for social action and for spiritual formation. She found such spirit and friendships within the Newman Society and its ecumenism. ‘I remember being swept up by a Mass with trumpets in Newman chapel’, she wrote, ‘and I have a vivid memory of being in a big crowd of students on the platform of a railway station, coming home from a summer camp singing “These bones gonna rise again”’.<sup>5</sup> Here then were values that young women of the time could live by. There were many who saw urgent social problems to be solved, political, social and spiritual work to be done. Some forged ahead without a woman’s movement, waiting for others to catch up.

In November 1957 one of the last issues of *The Radcliffe News* reported that representatives of *Mademoiselle* magazine had visited the college, seeking members for their college boards.<sup>6</sup> *Mademoiselle* was a constant presence in American college students’ lives in the 1950s. An earlier item headlined simply ‘*Mademoiselle*’ explained some of the links in a profile of student Mary Lyon.

As Radcliffe’s member of *Mademoiselle*’s College Board, Mary left for the magazine’s New York office on a Monday last June ... She was assigned a story on college and ‘little magazines’ (which was published in the College issue of *Mlle*). The rest of her month as Guest Associate Editor was spent in ‘going to innumerable parties and meeting wonderful people’. She interviewed writer Jean

5 Wendy Poussard, ‘Remember the spirit’s roar’ in Val Noone with Terry Blake, Mary Doyle and Helen Praetz (eds), *Golden years. Grounds for hope: Father Golden and the Newman Society, 1950–1966*, Golden Project, Melbourne, 2008, p. 212.

6 ‘Magazine rep visits college’, *The Radcliffe News*, November 1957.

Stafford ... and spent most of her time reading manuscripts and doing occasional rewriting.<sup>7</sup>

Yet Mary Lyon had reservations about *Mademoiselle*. ‘Asked about permanent work on a magazine of the same type, Mary answered “this kind of work is not something you’d want to dedicate all your life to – their values are off”’.<sup>8</sup>

Off or not it was clearly a good prospect for a time as the next issue of *The Radcliffe News* noted: ‘This year’s Vogue “Prix de Paris” award has gone to Mary Lyon, giving her a three month trial training period in the fall’.<sup>9</sup> A further item noted that ‘*Mlle* [sic] Opens Contest for 1950 Guest Editors; Twenty to be Chosen’.<sup>10</sup> Twenty lucky students would be chosen from the College Board to guest edit the special college edition of *Mademoiselle*: they would gain experience, be paid for a month, meet people in their field, gain advice, enjoy field trips and much beside.

Such an offer appealed to many young women in the 1950s and early 60s, particularly in the United States. A career in writing, editing or publishing was a highly desired vocational choice. An interest in fashion was assumed to be part of the educated women’s repertoire but it was for the opportunity for more serious writing that *Mademoiselle* appealed. Sylvia Plath, at Smith College, wrote in her journal: ‘I want to write because I have the urge to excel in one medium of translation and expression of life’.<sup>11</sup> Again, triumphantly, in 1953 she recorded:

I am lucky: I am at Smith because I wanted it and I worked for it. I am going to be a Guest Editor on *Mlle* [Mademoiselle] in June because I wanted it and worked for it. I am being published in *Harper’s* because I wanted it and worked for it. Luckily I could translate wish to reality by the work.<sup>12</sup>

7 ‘*Mademoiselle*’, *The Radcliffe News*, September 1949.

8 Ibid.

9 *The Radcliffe News*, Commencement issue 1950, p. 2.

10 p. 6.

11 Kukul, *The unabridged journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 184.

12 p. 183.

Plath's passion for writing went far beyond that of many of her contemporaries but the idea of a stint at *Mademoiselle* was just as welcome as to others. Plath too felt, however, that 'their values were off', as her excoriating fictionalized account in her novel *The bell jar*<sup>13</sup> reveals.

What did the young women graduating from Stanford, Radcliffe and Smith in the fifties see as their 'rendezvous with destiny'? And what values would they adopt? Did it go beyond a stint at *Mademoiselle*? David Riesman, author of *The lonely crowd*, dismissed these career choices as limited:

Even very gifted and creative young women are satisfied to assume that on graduation they will get underpaid ancillary positions, whether as a *Time-Life* researcher or United Nations guide or publisher's assistant or reader, where they are seldom likely to advance to real opportunity, whether in terms of status or freedom of choice in their work.<sup>14</sup>

How typical were those career choices, those values: of women's colleges, of co-educational universities, of the United States or of Australia? Could they lead to real careers? In particular how did young women see their role as women *vis-à-vis* men? Several commentators, as we shall see, were sure that feminism as such had disappeared. It certainly did not figure in my thinking. Typically I dreamed of life as a secretary to a famous world-travelling writer in whose fame I would bask. Plath realized that her desired choice of marriage would inevitably lead to losing some of her intellectual edge: 'Some day when I am stumbling up to cook eggs and feed milk to the baby', she wrote, 'and prepare dinner for my husband's friends, I shall pick up Bergson, or Kafka, or Joyce, and languish for the minds that are outleaping and outskipping mine'.<sup>15</sup>

Yet Radcliffe students did have the chance to consider values other than motherhood, fashion and the home. On 17 March 1950, *The Radcliffe News* reported, they could attend a Harvard Law School forum on 'Kitchen or career' – featuring Miss Lillian Hellman (a career

13 Sylvia Plath, *The bell jar*, William Heinemann, London, 1963.

14 David Riesman, 'Two generations', *Daedalus*, 93(2), 1964, p. 730.

15 Kukil, *The unabridged journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 225.

woman), the head of Sarah Lawrence College (a man) and Dr Marynia Farnham, the co-author of the book *Modern woman: the lost sex*. The notice mentioned that Farnham's book,

a centre of controversy from the time of its publication ... attacks feminism as the desire of neurotic women to imitate men. Considered by some to be conservative or reactionary, the book advocates the education of women in feminine rather than masculine subjects.<sup>16</sup>

Other items at that time flesh out the picture of the classes of that decade and a focus on feminine subjects, which would have pleased Farnham. As we have seen, a considerable proportion of the students of the time were already married. Many women in the mid-fifties completed their degrees as married women, some whose young husbands were serving in the armed forces. By 1961, however, the numbers of those married at graduation had declined. In the Radcliffe class of 1961 twelve members of class were 'married and not working', six travelling and the majority of the class of 241 were either working or studying.<sup>17</sup>

Some students were already honing the skills that would propel them into politics – or an academic or journalistic life – at a later stage.

## The single biggest time for me

*Mademoiselle* magazine was part of Gloria Steinem's life too: her papers include the booklet 'The young American in Europe 1956', reprinted from *Mademoiselle*, College and Career Department. In 1957 after graduation Steinem won a Chester Bowles Scholarship to India. In

16 *The Radcliffe News*, 17 March 1950.

17 *Radcliffe News from the College*, Summer 1961.

a letter describing that opportunity Steinem wrote: 'It gives me a start as a writer and journalist which is what I very much want to be'.<sup>18</sup>

The committee that appointed Steinem was thoroughly supportive of her plans. They wrote that they 'think of you often here at Smith, and are backing you all the way – and are really proud to have you represent us over in India: couldn't ask for a better "ambassador"'.<sup>19</sup>

The Indian trip was a radicalizing experience for Steinem, giving her a definite awareness of 'injustices and indignities of colonialism, poverty etc.' She wrote vividly of her time in India; from small personal details to larger political movements. On sari wearing, for example, she wrote, 'and when I go to villages or weddings and pull the end of my sari over my head as the other women do, you have no idea of the looking-out-at-the-world sense of security it brings'.<sup>20</sup>

Like Plath and Lyon, Steinem was another fifties graduate keen to write for a range of magazines. After winning the Chester Bowles Scholarship she approached several journals, including *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Travel* and *Mademoiselle*. Before the Indian trip she wrote copious letters seeking publishers for articles during her time away, telling editors that she had graduated with a 'junior Phi Beta Kappa and magna cum laude in government with a minor in general literature', writing that her 'travel project concerns that in which the west is most interested, the communist party of India'. She revealed a keen sense of her market, informing editors: 'Furthermore, the idea of a twenty-two year old girl just out of Smith College and reasonably photogenic (once a model and dancer) spending a year in India might add to the basic interest of the subject matter'. These representations of an apparently assured self seem at odds with Steinem's much later autobiographical presentation of herself as deeply lacking in self-esteem.<sup>21</sup>

18 Gloria Steinem papers, General correspondence 1954–69, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

19 Ibid.

20 Gloria Steinem papers, General correspondence 1954–69.

21 Gloria Steinem, *Revolution from within: a book of self-esteem*, Little, Brown and Co, Boston, MA, 1992.

Steinem displayed early entrepreneurial skills in garnering support for her writing, for films and for selling and designing sandals.<sup>22</sup> In the process she developed a wide range of international contacts. She noted that she was ‘writing pamphlets for TWA in return for my passage’, also acquiring a letter of support and introduction from them. Over the years she was to write for many journals. Defining herself as a freelancer she contributed to *Show*, *McCalls*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *Help*, *Esquire*, *Glamour*, even *Ladies Home Journal*.<sup>23</sup>

In a personal letter from India Steinem described her involvement in a Gandhian protest:

At Gandhigram I met many of Gandhi’s followers and discovered that they were forming a ‘yatra’ to walk through the Ramnad area and try to stop the caste riots (was that in American newspapers? It should have been ... villages were burned, people shot, butchered, tortured ... all because of caste tensions and politicians who took advantage of them). They needed a woman to go along, to go into the women’s quarters and bring them out to the meetings, to be there so that other women would come. They said can you walk twenty-five miles a day with only one sari, a towel, a cup and a comb? Can you live on what the villagers give you and sleep on the ground? ‘Of course’ said I, not knowing? So we set out on foot, walking from 5 to eleven in the morning and four to eleven at night to sleep through the midday heat.<sup>24</sup>

There follows an account of a speech Steinem developed, urging villagers to eschew revenge, to wait for land reforms, until a few days later blistered and infected feet cut short her crusade. ‘All together it was probably the single biggest time in India for me’, Steinem wrote, ‘a time of learning the most about this country and about what does and does not really matter ... in any country’.<sup>25</sup>

These letters provide a fascinating insight into the construction of a self and of India as the site where that self could develop. Values far from those of *Mademoiselle* could be forged. We might wonder in

22 Steinem papers, General correspondence 1954–69.

23 Ibid.

24 Letter to David, 4 February 1958, p. 4, Steinem papers, Series 2, Correspondence.

25 Ibid.

hindsight at the implicit self-representation of Steinem as the gallant young adventurer from the west, bringing succour to the impoverished of India. But for a sheltered young American woman the experience was radicalizing. India was for Steinem an opportunity for developing an identity as a political activist, one she was to put to good effect later in life. In that context she experienced a sense of agency, of direct power, unimaginable to a young woman in America at the time.

Her writings reveal the emerging journalist and political activist. They show a growing awareness, an urgent sense of inquiry. Particularly interesting was a discussion of a Radical Humanist Study Camp, held at Mussoorie, where Steinem joined a group studying the ideas of the Indian humanist M.N. Roy. Steinem wrote an article for the journal *The Radical Humanist* on her impressions titled 'In the camp of the radical humanists'.<sup>26</sup> Aware of the colonial past, Steinem nevertheless was most interested in the future. 'The most informative part of my stay there', she wrote of the 10 eight-hour-a-day sessions, 'was listening to this group of some thirty Indians from all parts of the country discuss problems of their future'.<sup>27</sup> Steinem was intrigued by the humanist philosophy of the group – many of them former communists and independence fighters – but she despaired of their determination to oppose all political parties. It was, she felt,

a kind of hazy idealism in which every citizen is not only willing, but capable of deciding every issue, no matter how complex. This borders on Utopianism and makes them supremely critical of the compromises and half truths which seem so often the best that this struggling new Government can provide.<sup>28</sup>

Not only did Steinem learn a great deal about India and about politics but she honed her skills in entrepreneurship, in writing and in the building of strong networks for her later career. Also, she wrote later,

26 Gloria Steinem, 'In the camp of the radical humanists', *The Radical Humanist*, 30 June 1957.

27 Chester Bowles Asian Fellowship Report No. 3, Steinem papers, p. 7.

28 p. 9.

I was made so aware of my own ignorance of our coloured problem through the questioning of Indian friends that I spent two summers working in a negro community center here in Washington so that I might better understand this problem which looms so large in Asian eyes.<sup>29</sup>

This was not Steinem's first trip overseas: she had spent her junior year abroad in Geneva in 1955, a radicalizing experience as we saw from Alison Prentice's letters (Chapter 3). At the age of twenty-two Steinem was quite a veteran of international travel. It was not without insight that Patricia Glass, Associate Director in the Vocational Office at Smith College, invited her back to talk to students in 1958, suggesting as possible topics 'Using your imagination in achieving vocational goals' or 'Opportunities for the adventurous graduate student'.<sup>30</sup>

While the student-focused *Radcliffe News* recorded details of destinations and fashion, commentators in the wider community worried about women students' narrow preoccupations, as we have seen (see Chapter 3). David Riesman, for instance, was concerned at the high attrition rates in women's colleges and the fact that so many married and followed their husbands.<sup>31</sup> He overlooked the exceptions such as Gloria Steinem and Jill Ker Conway.

Dean Nancy Lewis of Pembroke was also concerned at the college girl's narrow aspirations. Anticipating Betty Friedan, Lewis located the problems in a society that expected high standards of housekeeping and mothering without providing help or mental stimulation, that devalued the jobs women valued and that did not help young women to define vocational ends. Colleges for women should capitalize on these issues and provide something different for women, she argued.

Instead of pretending that what we are doing will have commercial value ... let us devote ourselves ... to the fullest possible development of her intellectual and

29 Steinem papers, Sophia Smith Collection.

30 Letter from Patricia Glass, Associate Director, Vocational Office, 14 October 1956, Steinem papers, Correspondence, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

31 Riesman, 'Women', p. 78.

spiritual powers – offer her timeless experiences of the mind and spirit. Let us not be unduly disturbed if our graduates are not immediately comfortable and happy.<sup>32</sup>

Lewis mentioned a *Fortune Magazine* study of a young suburban community made up of college graduates and overwhelmingly devoted to ‘conformity’. Here she betrays the fear of the grey conformity that worried so many professionals and intellectuals in the 1950s.

Concluding her address to a conference on trends in liberal arts education, Lewis referred to President Davis of Smith College who asked: can we expect them always easily to adjust – a vision of truth may ‘disturb their adjustment forever’. ‘Let us not be disturbed if our students find that they face problems after leaving our colleges. Let us only be profoundly shaken if we see no evidence that they have been exposed to a vision of the truth.’<sup>33</sup> In essence Lewis, like Riesman, argued against the goal of ‘adjustment’ so typical of the era to which so much psychological work was aimed.

A few years later, as concern about the place of women in the United States was reawakening, a special issue of *Daedalus* was devoted to ‘The woman in America’. The preface canvassed some of the same issues:

Mr Degler believes that the absence of an ideology legitimating such activity [women working and rearing children] has been a serious handicap. He suggests that the insistence of American women on viewing their advances in a non-ideological manner has contributed to blunting the effectiveness of the gains they have made.<sup>34</sup>

In other words where was feminism when it was needed?

How then can we reconcile the idea of a generation of young educated women, many consumed with issues of fashion, of pending marriage and motherhood, with harbingers of an emerging revolution, one that was to burst forth in the late 1960s and 1970s? Clearly many did engage in serious reflection as we have seen and in paid work, often

32 Lewis, ‘College women and their proper spheres’, p. 212.

33 Ibid.

34 Stephen Graubard, ‘Preface’, *Daedalus*, 93(2), 1964, p. 580.

combining it with marriage in ways they had not anticipated. In what follows we trace their paths in their lives after college towards political engagement and a nascent feminism. We observe the differences between those who were studying in the 1950s and early 60s and those who were teaching them – and worrying about their strange lack of commitment.

## But was feminism dead?

‘There are few Noras in contemporary American society’, Alice Rossi charged in her ‘immodest proposal’, ‘because women have deluded themselves that the doll’s house is large enough to find complete personal fulfilment within it’.<sup>35</sup> Rossi, who was teaching at the University of Chicago, declared feminism dead, laying the blame squarely on the conservatism of psychology and sociology in the postwar period. Linked with it and partly attributable to it was, she believed, the ‘pervasive permeation of psychoanalytic thinking throughout American society’.<sup>36</sup> Further, this psychoanalytic pervasiveness led to a

defensive and apologetic note of many older unmarried professional women, the guilt which troubles the working mother (which I suspect goes up in proportion to the degree to which she is familiar with psychoanalytic ideas), the restriction of the level of aspiration of the college women, the early plunge into marriage, the closed door of the doll’s house.<sup>37</sup>

Here was an all-purpose scapegoat indeed.

Rossi’s analysis is full of telling barbs. Society, she argued, is so inundated with psychoanalytic thinking that any dissatisfaction or conflict can only be seen on an individual basis. This certainly seemed to

35 Rossi, ‘Equality between the sexes’, p. 608.

36 p. 612.

37 p. 613.

be so if the surveys of the time are taken into account. Strikingly she claimed that, for the first time in the history of any known society, motherhood had become a full-time occupation for adult women.<sup>38</sup> Rossi was far from alone in deploring the trend to early marriage and self-effacement for young women. The pervasiveness of expectations of domesticity in the 1950s worried exactly the type of older unmarried professional women she mentioned, women such as Marine Leland, teacher of French at Smith College, who had very different ideals. Leland was typical of that earlier generation of highly educated women, single but living within a woman-centred culture.<sup>39</sup> Writing to a friend in 1953 Leland observed:

As for me I am becoming Machiavellian on the subject [of marriage]. Since *married women* and mothers are in fashion just now, and [I] have resorted to stressing the legal disabilities of *married women* who cease being *persons* before the law by virtue of their marriage. My idea is to applaud the students' natural desire while stressing the need for all women – *especially the married ones* – to be on the alert in protecting the rights which previous generations gained for them and in correcting present injustices.

The present frenzy for marriage is surely a result of the war as well as a result of the growing emphasis on 'normalcy' and security. I noticed the advertising in the New Haven station last night. It is largely based on this Frenzy. The 'N. Y. Times', for instance, advertises 'Smart Young Couples read the Times', or 'the clever homemaker' (she is represented in the kitchen) 'reads the Times'. There is no point against trying to buck this trend, but I do think that it can be used in upholding Liberal Education for Women until such a time as women decide to become persons again.<sup>40</sup>

She did not adopt a 'defensive and apologetic' tone: Leland was, after all, writing a private letter to a friend with sympathetic views. She did not make her points publicly. Her reference to 'normalcy' is telling. Was she feeling conscious, as she wrote to another single, professional

38 p. 615.

39 Patricia Palmieri, *This Adamless Eden: the community of women faculty at Wellesley*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1995; Mackinnon, *Love and freedom*.

40 Marine Leland, letter to A.A. Cutler, 9 December 1953, original emphasis. I am grateful to Alison Prentice for alerting me to these records.

woman, of the pervasive attempt to paint women-identified women as abnormal, a result of the Freudian focus on heterosexuality as the only form of 'normal' sexuality?

Earlier Leland wrote:

last week (or was it last night) the College paper, *The Sophian*, sponsored a symposium on the theme: *A Liberal Education as a preparation for motherhood*. As you may suspect the title is nauseating to me. Why not a symposium at Yale on *A Liberal Education as a preparation for fatherhood*?<sup>41</sup>

Leland's suggestion reminds us of Dean Nancy Lewis's complaint that people were endlessly worried about educating women for men's needs but not vice versa. Lewis cheekily suggested a reversal, as we have seen.<sup>42</sup>

Many of the earlier generation of educated women, teaching in colleges and universities, and leading women's colleges, spoke out against the trend to early marriage and weak career aspiration. Rossi set out her desideratum, her ideal case scenario:

she will not marry before her adolescence and schooling are completed, but will be willing and able to view the college years as a 'moratorium' from deeply intense cross-sex commitments, a period of life during which her identity can be 'at large and open and various'.<sup>43</sup>

In her inauguration as fifth president of Radcliffe College in August 1960, Mary Bunting challenged her audience:

Older societies made laws to prevent women from practicing medicine or attending learned institutions. Today the laws are repealed but American women seem somewhat like a dog I knew, who long after the front fence had been removed, ran down the road to the place where the gate used to be, before running into the yard.<sup>44</sup>

41 Ibid.

42 Lewis, 'College women and their proper spheres', p. 207.

43 Rossi, 'Equality between the sexes', p. 647.

44 Mary Bunting, 'The fifth president speaks', *Radcliffe Quarterly*, August 1960, p. 18.

She did not entirely blame women: part of the problem was a ‘confusion of purpose’ in the United States. ‘No wonder that most of the talented youth in this country who fail to go on to college are girls’, she said. ‘No wonder that those who do so often drop out at the flick of a ring ... It is not so much a question of anti-feminism as anti-intellectualism.’<sup>45</sup>

Older educated women did provide exemplars for a different way of living. Australian legal expert Roma (later Dame Roma) Mitchell offered a model to young legal graduates in Adelaide:

She was actually marvellous with any people who were students at the university. She encouraged them like mad ... She managed beautifully in an age where it was much more prejudiced than in my time ... she was so clever and brilliant at things, you know, she got on top of it all.<sup>46</sup>

Carolyn Heilbrun claimed that status for Margaret Mead, noting that:

Despite the care she took not to offend the American cult of motherhood in the fifties – how outspoken revolutionary women can ever be is central to the question of female anxiety and ambivalence – she made new female destinies possible.<sup>47</sup>

Unlike many of the earlier feminists whose women-identified lives appeared sexless or, worse, deviant to Freudian-influenced young women in the fifties, Mead had married, had led an exotic life and was a mother, her ambiguous sexual life well below the public radar.

Carl Degler doubted America’s ability to nurture feminism. He claimed:

American society in general, which includes women [sic], shuns like a disease any feminist ideology ... [a] reading of the past reminds us that in America the soil is thin and the climate uncongenial for the growth of any seedlings of ideology.<sup>48</sup>

45 Ibid.

46 Interview with Pam Cleland, ‘Graduating in the fifties’ project.

47 Heilbrun, *Hamlet’s mother and other women*, p. 28.

48 Carl Degler, ‘Revolution without ideology: the changing place of women in America’, *Daedalus*, 93(2), 1964, p. 663.

Yet, as he wrote in 1964, the seeds were being sown and the older rhizomes were readying to burst into life anew. In California the free speech movement was erupting.

## The mainstream, the continuity and the premature liberationists

The majority of women who left their institutions of higher learning in the 1950s and early 60s, in both Australia and America, pursued the fifties norm in the first instance. They might be called ‘the mainstream’. A small band remained single, or chose female partners, and pursued careers. Some did seek to define modern ideologies, modern sensibilities. Susan Sontag, author, teacher, critic and lecturer, and a forerunner in this genre, was one who sought to define the new sensibility of the age:

The modern sensibility is more involved with pleasure than ever – in a complex way. It demands less ‘content’ in art, and is more open to the pleasures of ‘form’ and style; it is also less snobbish, less moralistic – in that it does not demand that pleasure in art is necessarily associated with edification.<sup>49</sup>

The pursuit of art, of dance and drama, and the pleasure of those forms, was central to many women of the time: creativity was viewed as a higher value than content. But as well as pleasure a concern for one’s society was also present as Susan Borman Delattre and Alison Prentice’s letters and Gloria Steinem’s work revealed. Many were aware of social and political issues and wished to ameliorate them through movements such as moral rearmament, peace activism, civil rights and the Student Christian Movement.

49 SS, ‘Opinion please’, first proof for *Mademoiselle*, 12 February 1965, Susan Sontag papers, Special Collections Library, UCLA.

Graduates from an earlier generation, such as Marine Leland, Margaret Mead, Mary Bunting, Alice Rossi and Roma Mitchell, continued to provide an example of engaged professional work, providing models for those who wanted to look beyond the kitchen and fashion. They might be described as ‘the continuity’, keeping the link, sometimes tenuous, with an earlier feminism. A small group moved into the workplace and tackled career and family issues from the outset, as had some highly educated women of the generation before. This group has been called ‘the anticipators’ but might also be named the proto-feminists or in Yohalem’s catchy term ‘premature liberationists’.<sup>50</sup>

All groups contributed to the movement that was to erupt in the 1970s, although their contributions took very different forms.

*The mainstream: ‘it was a simmer in there’*

The majority of the young women who left colleges and universities in Australia and the United States at this time expected to marry and raise children as we have seen. They were the young women of whom Degler, Lewis, Riesman and Leland despaired. During their college years their preoccupations – intellectual, social and sexual – led them to that destination. They were the generation that followed the lost years of the war, turning back to the security of traditional pathways, or new consumer-defined, psychologically constrained versions of those pathways. Alice Gorton met her future husband George Hart in her final year at Smith and like so many of her cohort married straight after graduation. This solved the vocation dilemma for Alice: ‘George has the problem – what for vocation; but all I must do is follow him. I can do it and do it well ... Freud which I have since come to accept, if not to believe fully.’<sup>51</sup> Yet beneath the apparent acquiescence many felt something was not right. A married lawyer recollects her dormant interest in women’s lives:

50 Yohalem, *The careers of professional women*, p. 195.

51 Alice Gorton Hart papers, 1953–54, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

I remember as a teenager and at university this thing about being a listener and the supporter and the amenable young woman. Those images of what it was to be ... even to be a good girl. Quite frankly, you know, just how oppressive I felt all that and how the things that I wanted to do naturally were considered not to be ladylike ... So there was always the feeling of resentment, and then when I started looking for work, as I said, those firms didn't take women ...

Yes, it was a simmer in there, and of course when you practised matrimonial law you realized.<sup>52</sup>

This was a woman who found that being at home with young children led to a feeling of constriction: 'Trapped is the word I'm looking for, the feeling that I had'. A young scientist had similar feelings: 'When I had my first child and I was at home alone with that child I can remember sitting down and weeping missing people, missing the discussions, the talk'.<sup>53</sup>

Later the young Australian lawyer became an activist in the early days of the women's movement. Books were important in helping her identify the sources of her resentment: 'Betty Friedan, that's right, her book. That really reflected how I felt. I loved Gloria Steinem and the things that she would write. Germaine Greer – I find she's too dense, I can't focus.'

Countless numbers of women who wrote in their reunion surveys and other writings mentioned the critical importance of key books in their awakening: *The second sex*, *The feminine mystique*, *The female eunuch*, *The women's room* were all mentioned. The scientist dealt with her misery by joining a Housewives Club: 'we had speakers, we used to invite the people ... you took your child along and put it in the crèche and then you could go and talk to other people'. Later she too took a part-time job lecturing in biology. 'I am a feminist', she claimed, 'but I'm not an avid feminist. As I said I've always had equal pay. I have a partnership with my husband, no I don't mean literally on paper, so I've always felt liberated.'<sup>54</sup> This is one of the women

52 Interview for 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

53 Interview for 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

54 Interview for 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

who, looking back over her life, used those fateful words: ‘I felt I had the best of all possible worlds’.

Alice Gorton Hart succumbed to the ‘motherly breath of the suburbs’<sup>55</sup> like so many of her cohort. She found herself with considerable ground to make up when in the 1970s as a mother of two sons she discovered the women’s movement. In its liberating embrace she found that many of the same old ghosts of twenty years earlier still haunted her: ‘I’m going to one workshop at the USU [Utah State University] women’s conference tomorrow – Body Image for Overweight Women’. Alice wrote later:

Body image. Yes – I really care for myself (must check blood pressure). Now I care about drawing and tennis, poetry and my friends ... Told George I’ve been a mother for 27 years and a wife for almost 30 and I’m sick of being both. I want to be companion, friend, playmate.<sup>56</sup>

Hart’s journal traced her reading and her dawning feminist consciousness. She was reading *Touchstones*:

something about a woman must pay her *debt* as a woman to husband, home and family before she does anything for her self ‘submission of will’ the whole thing is so revealing of *me*. I swallowed all that crap too. Tillie Olsen’s *Silences* ... But the NOW [National Organization of Women] meeting is training to lead a consciousness raising group and that could really change the quality of my life a lot. If George can’t or won’t give me what I need, I find it elsewhere.<sup>57</sup>

Hart was ready for the message of feminism.

It was not until many years after her graduation, challenged by feminism and reflecting on her decision to marry straight from college, that Alice Gorton Hart regretted the haste, the lost opportunities. Recognizing the value of her reflections she approached the Sophia Smith Collection in the 1980s. Their reply delighted her:

55 Plath, *The bell jar*, p. 119.

56 Alice Gorton Hart, Journal, July 1982 – October 1983, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

57 Ibid, original emphasis. For an overview of NOW see Rosen, *The world split open*.

Letter from Mary-Elizabeth Murdock, director of Sophia Smith Collection and she would be pleased indeed to accept my journals. I am relieved and delighted to be part of the archive, one of the two largest in the world, she says. Knowing this may be used to help other women is exciting, a tad of immortality ... and I don't think it will dry up my honesty.<sup>58</sup>

It did not. Hart's honesty is compelling. Around her fifty-first birthday she wrote, 'Starved for good conversation. Where does one find new friends, new interests? I'll be a volunteer at the museum.' Tellingly she quoted former classmate Sylvia Plath: 'Winter is for women'. It was in this period that Hart approached the Smith Collection as a repository for her expanding collection of journals. An Australian contemporary echoes Hart's needs. 'Desperately wanted companionship of intellectuals', she wrote. 'Hid my knowledge, read and had a rich fantasy life.'<sup>59</sup>

### *The premature liberationists*

When Jill Ker began her historical research she chose as her subjects the first generation of American women who in the 1870s and '80s entered graduate study. She found her women subjects a welcome 'relief from the social attitudes and values of the 1950s'. In their enthusiastic contributions to public life and their progressive values they offered something new to the young scholar, a sense of herself seen through others. 'I was looking at myself *through the lens of history*', she wrote, 'something my male colleagues had always done'.<sup>60</sup> This epiphany prefigured the larger reversals of the next decade when feminism would encourage women to look at themselves kindly rather than critically. They would examine parts of their bodies that had been taboo or the domain of the male gynaecologist only. They would see themselves as actors in the historical landscape.

58 Alice Gorton Hart, Journal, July 1982 – October 1983, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

59 Anonymous survey respondent, 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

60 Conway, *True north*, p. 56, emphasis added.

With her research happily underway Jill Ker Conway took hold of her life. 'At thirty-three, about to be thirty-four, I saw myself as a scholar', she wrote. 'History was what I did and would do for the rest of my life'.<sup>61</sup> She explained that thirty-three seems late for such a discovery but added 'but a woman develops her sense of her working self on a different trajectory from that of a man'.<sup>62</sup> Within this trajectory if women could defer the decision to marry further heights were possible.

Germaine Greer set her sights on Cambridge, England, and found herself alone there:

When I came up to Cambridge my fellow students were showing their parents around their rooms, the lecture theatres, the Backs, posing for pictures in the family album. The families beamed with pleasure, shouted and ran about, gathering images of their successful children against the background of Erasmus's bridge and the Wren Library and the stone nougat of King's College. Nobody photographed me, not then, not when I knelt resplendent in medieval red and black with my hands joined in prayer within those of the Vice-Chancellor, Germaine Greer Doctoris Cantabrigiensis. I collected my degree by myself. There was no victory supper, no champagne. I had worked all my life for love, done my best to please everybody, kept on going till I reached the top, looked about and found I was all alone.<sup>63</sup>

Is it significant that women such as Greer, Conway, Steinem and Plath, who in various ways plumbed the female condition, had lost their fathers, or felt alienated from them? Conway's father had urged her, before his death during her childhood, to 'Do something Jill. Don't just put in time on this earth.'<sup>64</sup> Plath too lost her authoritarian father in early childhood. Hunter Steiner claims the young Sylvia had wished him dead then, in the manner of children, was wracked with guilt at his passing.<sup>65</sup> I too lost my father as I began my university years. He had set me, an eldest child, an internal script – to see the mountain top and to keep climbing upwards. Such injunctions have

61 p. 149.

62 Ibid.

63 Greer, *Daddy, we hardly knew you*, p. 152.

64 Conway, *The road from Coorain*, p. 187.

65 Steiner, *A closer look at Ariel*.

lasting effects. It was not until I explored these issues many years later that I allowed myself to relax the search for an endless and ultimately impossible perfection. I'm sure I'm not alone in this.

Like the lawyer who felt uncomfortable with the prescriptions to be a good listener, acquiescent and amenable, some felt uncomfortable with injunctions that rankled but could not be expressed. Alison Prentice remembers her commencement address, presented by Adlai Stevenson:

I [absorbed] his awful prescription for our futures (we would be good mothers and educate our male children well) and, at some deep level, really resent[ed] it. W.H. Auden had said more or less the same thing, at his (compulsory for both him and his reluctant audience) 'chapel' address. We would read good books to our (presumably male) children – that's what I remember him saying, and that was the whole point of our superior education. Again, I wasn't good at articulating the rage I felt – it just simmered below the surface for a decade and a half – until I was rescued by feminism in the early 70s! Of course, maybe with Auden, who was a notorious alcoholic, as well as brilliant, maybe he was being ironic and sticking the knife in deliberately, hoping it might arouse some of us to revolt.<sup>66</sup>

Jill Ker, travelling in England and Europe with her mother at the completion of her Australian degree, became aware of a sense of condescension on the part of the English towards 'colonials' from Australia. Further, in elite university circles 'I became outraged by the unmistakable undertones of studied rudeness to women'.<sup>67</sup> Ker modelled for a few months for a fashion designer, becoming totally disenchanted with designers and fashion photographers whom she felt did not like women. Such insights, and slights, sowed the seeds for later feminism.

While latent feminism 'simmered' below the surface, many young women became interested in broader social and political issues. Jill Ker deplored the British 'self-satisfied exploitation of colonial people which was clothed in comfortable rhetoric in peacetime and exposed as cold calculation in time of war'.<sup>68</sup> Prentice recalls of her Geneva year abroad that 'people I met were very religious and very

66 Interview with Alison Prentice, 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

67 Conway, *The road from Coorain*, p. 210.

68 p. 208.

concerned about social justice and stuff like that. So I became very interested in social justice issues and poverty, international relations and why the war had happened.’ Her visit to East Berlin was also fateful:

We ... met students in East Berlin and sat down in a café and talked with them and saw a Russian or a Communist propaganda film ... I’d seen an American propaganda film ... so this was pretty interesting, learning about propaganda. I guess it had me raising questions about everything by the time I’d got back.<sup>69</sup>

Both Ker and Greer, of course, later wrote key feminist texts. Conway hoped to join the Australian Department of External Affairs after her graduation from the University of Sydney but found herself deemed unsuitable as a woman. Her rejection led her

to think what it meant that I was a woman, instead of acting unreflectingly as though I were a man, *bound to live out the script of a man’s life*. This one blow of fate made me identify with other women and prompted me, long before it was politically fashionable to do so, to try and understand their lives.<sup>70</sup>

This rejection occurred at much the same time that Ruth Dobson, from the Department of External Affairs, challenged the Australian Federation of University Women to take a more significant role ‘in pursuits not necessarily the prerogative of women, but in fields where women *should* participate and *have* a contribution to make equal to that of men’.<sup>71</sup> She felt that women, particularly university women, had a strong responsibility ‘to press for the rights and opportunities of all women in all fields’.

Later Jill Ker Conway wrote two major works on women’s history in the United States, and taught one of the first courses on women’s history in Canada, contributing to the opening up of the dis-

69 Interview with Alison Prentice, ‘Graduating in the fifties’ project.

70 Conway, *The road from Coorain*, p 193, emphasis added.

71 Ruth Dobson, ‘Role of women in public affairs in Australia’, AFUW 1960 conference report, pp. 46–47, S 195, Noel Butlin Archives, ANU, original emphasis.

cipline within North American universities.<sup>72</sup> She became the first woman president of Smith College.

In 1971 Greer wrote the hugely influential, often reprinted, *The female eunuch*, a manifesto for the women's movement. She continues to contribute to feminist debate with controversial, powerful polemics, as well as maintaining a body of scholarly work on literature. Conway and Greer are exemplars of the many 1950s graduates who drew on their rigorous training and their experience as women to rewrite the scripts of women's lives in the following decades. Alison Prentice, inspired by early feminism, was a pioneer in women's history in Canada, becoming a distinguished university professor. In common with so many others these women had long and unanticipated careers within the academic sphere and beyond. Gloria Steinem co-founded the influential *Ms* magazine in 1972, an ironic counterpoint to the femininity of *Mademoiselle*. Genevieve Lloyd and Lynn Segal, whose lives were touched by the Sydney Push, went on to write significant feminist texts. Most had to leave Australia to find their voices, unlike their American sisters.

Teaching did not suit Sylvia Plath. Back at Smith to teach in 1957 she wrote in her journal: 'all my projected nostalgia for my students can't shake the conviction that teaching is a smiling public-service vampire that drinks blood and brain without a thank you'.<sup>73</sup> Plath did not play a part in the women's liberation movement, indeed she died before the movement began, at that critical age of thirty. But her short life and tragic death and her determination to combine a fully creative life, to see herself as a writer, a poet, and wife and mother, became iconic for many others.

72 Jill Ker Conway, *The female experience in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America: a guide to the history of American women*, Garland, New York, 1982.

73 Kukil, *The unabridged journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 377.

## Finding the new self: seeking a feminist consciousness

‘Early feminism was a moral argument’, wrote Susan Sontag, ‘A question of justice. Then, when it took hold in America, where moral arguments have been so hollowed out, it became a psychological argument ... a question of the cultivation of the self, the search for happiness.’<sup>74</sup> Certainly the search for a new self was recognized as a key goal of women’s liberation. Countless books have charted the histories of the women’s liberation movement and I do not intend to take that journey here.<sup>75</sup> What interests me is the contribution of highly educated women to that movement – and the impact it had on those educated women who came to it later. Forty years after their graduation women could look back and assess the changes they had undergone. Like Shelley Moorman Howatt they had often had their lives thoroughly jolted. Reunion books, interviews and surveys provide a wide range of individual and class responses to the revolution that changed lives in the 1970s. The Smith class of 1954, the Vasser classes of 1957 and 1958, and the Radcliffe class of 1964 all declared the women’s movement to have significantly changed – or influenced – their lives.<sup>76</sup>

‘Did “the women’s movement” significantly affect your concept of yourself and your role at home and outside the home?’ ‘Where did you go with this new self?’ These questions challenged former students of Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts, when they opened the questionnaire that was to be the basis of their fortieth reunion report.<sup>77</sup> The question of the ‘new self’ elicited a wide range of replies. ‘I began to live more comfortably in my old self’, wrote one.

74 Susan Sontag, *On women*, 1999, Susan Sontag papers, Special Collections Library, UCLA.

75 See for instance Rosen, *The world split open*.

76 Barbara Strauss Heller, ‘Class Profile’, 1954, Reunion Books, Smith College Archives; Brown and Pacini, ‘The Vasser classes of 1957 and 1958’, p. 187 and Stewart and Vandewater, ‘The Radcliffe class of 1964’, p. 244.

77 Radcliffe College, Class of ’56 40th reunion, 1996, compiled by yearbook committee, Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America.

‘[I] was more frequently outrageous’, wrote another. ‘I have been in therapy for twenty years trying to find myself’, was another response, in contrast to a classmate who wrote: ‘not a new self, just a more confident self’. Another ‘gradually unglued her identity from being wife-mother-daughter’. In response to the question ‘where did you go with your new self’, one woman wrote, quite literally: ‘into some interesting beds in that exciting window of hedonism between the sexual revolution and the onset of herpes and AIDS ... I’m grateful for my lucky timing’.<sup>78</sup> The mainstream may have begun with the Very Easy Simplicity Pattern for women but they graduated to much more complex designs.

Where did fifties and early sixties Australian graduates see themselves in relation to women’s liberation when they looked back on that period? They did not unanimously endorse the women’s movement. Many felt they were there already, ahead of the game in fact. The one point on which nearly all could agree was the need for equal rights.

### *From ‘at last’ to zen*

I asked the Australian women ‘Do you describe yourself as traditional, feminist, women’s liberationist or a supporter of equal opportunity?’ About three quarters of the respondents to my survey described themselves as supporters of equal opportunity.<sup>79</sup> About equal numbers described themselves as feminist and traditional, and an even smaller minority chose ‘women’s liberationist’. Two women declared they were all of these things.

One woman chose none of the categories, stating: ‘I grew up in an atmosphere where anyone could do what they wanted to do in life if they wished – gender didn’t come into it’. Other responses given to this question were ‘a modified traditionalist, adjusting to the times’, ‘a human being’, ‘individualist’, ‘supporter of people doing what they want

78 Ibid, anonymous excerpts from responses published in the reunion book.

79 ‘Graduating in the fifties’ project.

to do with their lives', 'a loner', 'an "individual" who is wary of seeing herself in terms of any of the above labels', 'a radical conservative', 'opposed to trite labels', 'a qualified feminist', 'intelligent human being', 'a scientist', 'eclectic', 'a rational feminist' and, finally, 'zen'.

Many of the respondents supported equal opportunity. This was non-negotiable. 'I do not fit the role of the banner waver whose job is to jolt the consciousness of society – but I am committed to equality of opportunity.' 'Men and women should have opportunity to develop to their full potential and each should respect the other.' Many added their opposition to affirmative action, which was often described as 'tokenism'. A number of respondents also expressed their support for men and women sharing equally in domestic duties and child rearing.

There were negative comments about feminism:

I have always found the rhetoric empty and egoistic. I have witnessed abused women being 'paraded' for the ends of this women's movement or that. I have witnessed the continuing abuse of the caring 'Oz' male and found it an abominable perversion of my own life experience ... I have been cared for and dreamed for etc by the males in my life. Maybe the poor bastards got it wrong a lot of the time but so did I about them.

'I do not think women should gain either just because they are women', claimed another. "Positive discrimination" ... is ultimately demeaning to women.' 'I do not feel comfortable with radical feminists who denigrate a large proportion of the female population who find full satisfaction in a husband, children and a home.' 'Not interested in "isms". Do not support extremists.' 'I don't like pushy women any more than pushy men.' 'I heartily dislike the rabid feminists who demean womanly virtues and discourage manly chivalry.' 'Change with tolerance and reasonableness is more lasting than aggressive change.' "Aggressive" feminism I find off-putting.' One was desperate: 'I believe the feminist movement is about to destroy the whole human race. I am trying to prevent this.' For many of these women it seems the style of the new movement as much as the substance was off-putting.

Many commented on the complementary roles of men and women: 'Passionate belief in role of family in society, and personal experience of "breeding and feeding" made me prepared to accept differences in gender roles as they offered advantages as well as disadvantages.' 'Women and men are made differently and we complement each other.' Women 'should not try to outdo men, or to be like men (i.e. they should retain their femininity)'. 'Vive la Différence!'

Some thought that feminism was either futile (nothing could change) or unnecessary (nothing more needed to change). 'I do not think we are likely to achieve equality because women are limited by their biological restrictions', one claimed. 'There are no real disadvantages to being a female in Australia', another lucky woman asserted. Another wrote that she did not need feminism because she was already employed and her husband shared the domestic work. A dentist was happy being 'one of the boys' in an all-male profession and did not want to be singled out.

One woman insisted that she was not oppressed as a woman in school or her workplace, though she was oppressed in her marriage. The following response was similar: 'I never felt the need for feminism in my career e.g. I was the "first female" in several jobs at my teaching hospital. Marriage made me a feminist!' Another wrote: 'I have never been oppressed by men! I realise that if one has had bad experiences of them, one's attitude would be very different.'

Some had mixed feelings about feminism: 'I believe one parent should be at home with pre-school children ... I feel women's movement probably made it easier for me to obtain positions of responsibility.' 'I think social expectations and definitions of roles are changing and that changes that allow women autonomy and expression of their abilities are of benefit to everyone. I don't identify with "blame patriarchy".' 'I did not have time to become involved, though I had resented, since 1948, the fact that I was paid less than a man for doing the same job, so was involved in discussions of equal pay for teachers.'

I grew up expecting and getting equality at work [claimed a pharmacist] therefore no reason to be a rabid feminist. I gnash my teeth with bank managers and

men's committees at my golf club, but I believe that a quiet and constant assumption that you are equal pays off.

I was too busy with young children, or with teaching, to notice much women's movement. Only 'educated' in this by my son's girlfriends. Too late and too upsetting to change much, by that age. Would be disappointed to find a young woman acting and thinking as I did.

Others felt unambiguously positively about feminism: 'the guilt has gone about being out of the home'. 'The women's movement gave me a chance to meet many women like myself.' The women's movement 'opened my eyes to just how much of our lives was patterned on old attitudes and expectations of male/female roles and not personal choice. Not anti-men as people – feel they need liberation too.' 'Betty Friedan changed my views utterly, or rather articulated my views of many years. Then women's movements confirmed my beliefs in women's equality and society's inequality.' 'The women's movement has affected me indirectly – I read Greer, Friedan et al, but only really understood much of it when my feminist daughters grew up.' 'Consider women have still enormous amount to contribute to humanity and running of the world and want men to develop same gifts.' 'I knew about the earlier feminist movement, so the 1960s/70s movement was more like "at last" than something new.' 'My career – the education of girls – has been driven by a commitment to the education of women leading to absolutely equal opportunity and an equal role in society.' 'I now feel stung by the injustices. The women's movement taught me to acknowledge those feelings.'

I was in the same Honours English tutorial group as Germaine Greer for 3 years [wrote one woman]. Although our ideas were different it was surprising years later to read 'The Female Eunuch' and discover so many areas of agreement. Marilyn French's 'The Women's Room' also influenced me.

One woman acknowledged that she was a feminist because of her 'mother's failure to use education outside the home and her narrower life as a result'. A religious sister stated that her religious community was 'dedicated to freeing women from all kinds of oppression'. Most

of the religious in the study identified as feminists or women's liberationists.<sup>80</sup>

'It is difficult to tell whether the women's movement had really changed the thinking of these women or simply articulated what they really had felt all along about the meaning of their education and skills', wrote Brown and Pacini of their Vassar subjects.<sup>81</sup> It is clear that many highly educated women felt that they had anticipated the women's movement and were waiting for others to catch up, particularly those who graduated early in the 50s. They felt that they had achieved their goals through their own efforts and initiative and did not need a movement to support them. This seemed particularly so of those in the professions – medical doctors and lawyers – who made their way unobtrusively and without fanfare, often overlooking what they felt were trivial slights. Many rejected what they called 'ideological' approaches while recognizing the value of specific changes such as equal pay. Others welcomed the new analyses of feminism, the struggles that resulted in clearer pathways for careers, for promotion and recognition.

Those who had completely accepted the domestic ideology of the times, had married early and devoted themselves to full-time home-making and a husband's career, were often the most bitter, felt most cheated. In the study of the Radcliffe class of 1964 women were divided into three groups post-graduation: those on 'the family clock', those on the 'career clock' and those who combined 'both family and career clocks'. At age 37 the women on the family clock alone had more regrets than any of the others. The authors concluded that the early exclusive commitment to one life project 'seems to have had more consequences for those pursuing the family clock'.<sup>82</sup> Women such as those dedicated to the 'family clock', and later regretting lost opportunities, were part of the vast force behind the women's move-

80 All responses from the open-ended questions in Alison Mackinnon, 'Graduating in the fifties' survey.

81 Brown and Pacini, 'The Vassar classes of 1957 and 1958', p. 187.

82 Stewart and Vandewater, 'The Radcliffe class of 1964', p.252.

ment, the women for whom the writings of Friedan, Greer, Steinem and others came as a revelation, a call to action.

*Dust on the mind ...*

The struggle for equal rights, on which most women could agree, did not disappear throughout the period. An earlier generation, often dismissed by the young women of the time as unattractive, uninteresting and old hat, kept alive the onward march. 'Jay Cee wanted to teach me something, all the old ladies I ever knew wanted to teach me something, but I suddenly did not think they had anything to teach me', complained Sylvia Plath's character, typifying the attitude to earlier feminists.<sup>83</sup> As we have seen they looked with alarm at the early rush into domesticity and the abandonment of careers for jobs. Yet through organizations such as the American and Australian Associations of University Women, and the International Federation of University Women, linked with UNESCO and other international bodies, women quietly pushed forward.<sup>84</sup>

The university women's associations surveyed married women who wanted to join the workforce, and dismissed links between women's work and juvenile delinquency or maladjustment. They pushed for more scholarships, fellowships – rare and highly valued – and career counselling. They commented wryly on the problem of husbands: 'The theory that it is better to have dust on the furniture than dust on the mind is apparently a sentiment most husbands would not subscribe to'.<sup>85</sup> They assessed what was available on a part-time basis for the increasing numbers of graduates who wanted to return to work part time when their children were at school. In Australia in 1960 market research and high school teaching were the only areas actively recruiting part-timers although some medical women and

83 Plath, *The bell jar*, p. 6.

84 See Eisenmann, 'A time of quiet activism'.

85 P. Morris, 'Changing attitudes to married women working outside the home', AFUW/NSW Symposium, September 1960, Noel Butlin Archives, ANU, p. 4.

dentists could negotiate part-time employment. In the US editing, publishing, journalism and freelance writing also offered significant opportunities. This was a less favoured option in Australia. But part-time work could also be demeaning for those who yearned to offer more. Alice Gorton Hart felt undervalued yet exhilarated by her casual university teaching:

I was in a bitter rage this morning over the injustice of it all – the last minute hiring, the key humiliation, the exclusion and separation – but then I thought it was good to stand alone and independent, went to the office and did a bang-on job on a Cummins paper preparation and then had a rather exciting class.<sup>86</sup>

By the time women were writing in their fortieth reunion books, and responding to questionnaires, the world had ‘split open’, to use Ruth Rosen’s apt expression.<sup>87</sup> Many women had been forced to review their values, to rethink their priorities, to rework their ‘self’. Many from the mainstream joined the premature liberationists to swell the ranks of the women’s liberation movement. Hart wondered if she had married early ‘because of secret fear of ability to do anything else’. Days before her early death from cancer in 1987 her journals record the persistent questions that shaped her adult life. She had seen her life through the lens of a man, not through her own prism – and it had let her down. She was still agonizing over the relationship with her husband – ‘and independence issue, talked to counselor who spoke of central question: can you have a close loving relationship and be independent as well?’<sup>88</sup> This was the crucial question, one that was to concern not only the women of the classes of the 1950s and early 60s but those who were to follow.

86 Alice Gorton Hart, *Journal*, 1970–72.

87 Rosen, *The world split open*.

88 Alice Gorton Hart, *Journal*, July 1986 – June 1987.



## Conclusion: It's déjà vu all over again?

I was bearing witness to my own times and the battles central to my generation.<sup>1</sup>

As I write I look out on the bushland campus at the Australian National University in Canberra. It could not be more starkly different from the snow-covered grounds of Smith College, Alice Gorton's alma mater, where this story began. Sparse eucalypts replace firs and birches, the furry creatures in the trees are possums and twig-legged blue wrens take the place of the robins of the New England winter. The sun shines and dry leaves crackle underfoot. But the youthful female students in slim-fitting jeans, swinging hair and cropped tops look much the same as they purposefully go about their business.

I pinch myself that a journey that began with a Bachelor of Arts degree so many years ago could have brought me here a generation later. Where will their twenty-first century journeys take these young women? Like Nancy Miller I feel 'a renewed urgency to add the story of our lives to the public record'.<sup>2</sup>

'It's a pleasure to share one's memories', writes Susan Sontag. 'Everything remembered is dear, endearing, touching, precious. At least the past is safe – though we didn't know it at the time. We know it now. Because it's in the past; because we have survived.'<sup>3</sup>

When I talk about my work at a departmental seminar some who have survived recognize themselves within the story; others object that I have it wrong. 'In Sydney we never wore twin sets and pearls', one scoffs. 'That was only for those from the North Shore. We wore

1 Heilbrun, *Hamlet's mother and other women*, p. x.

2 Nancy K. Miller, 'Review essay: Public statements, private lives: academic memoirs for the nineties', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 22(4), 1997, p. 982.

3 Susan Sontag, 'Debriefing', in *A Susan Sontag reader (with an introduction by Elizabeth Hardwick)*, Penguin, London, 1983, p. 293.

sandals and shifts; we obeyed no rules.’ We are safe in our memories of rebellious younger selves. Jill Ker Conway confirms those observations, writing of ‘someone like me in my proper North Shore uniform of cashmere sweater, grey flannel skirt, and English walking shoes’.<sup>4</sup> Young women are bemused at stories of posture photos or beauty quests. They are scarce in the audience. Young women have other agendas. They are preoccupied with postcolonial studies, with studies of indigenous people and global lives, with pressing issues such as climate change. They are living the life they want and do not want to hear about the long pathway that brought us here.

And maybe they should not. After all, we’ve arrived, haven’t we? I’m not convinced. In common with many of my generation I see a disturbing tendency in early twenty-first-century society to retreat to many of the abandoned aspects of the 1950s. And I do not just mean the towering stilettos we banished for ever. In the United States many well-educated young women have retreated to the home and are ‘embracing the exclusive roles of housewife and mother’, as Carolyn Heilbrun remarks.<sup>5</sup> Others have graduated and occupy the career paths they want: they are now lawyers, doctors, holders of MBAs – that passport to a business career. To Heilbrun again: ‘Young women, particularly if they are rich and thin and using the latest in hair colours, are at the height of their attractiveness and their imprisonment in romantic illusions’.<sup>6</sup> Can they adopt and discard a performance of femininity at will, as Boyd argues of those Southern US college girls who regularly enact rituals of southern womanhood?<sup>7</sup> Have the ‘romantic illusions’ retained their pull in an age of extreme individualism? Certainly many highly educated young women in the 1990s rejected the supposed ‘puritanism’ of their mothers’ feminism, arguing instead for a liberated sexuality, for a ‘new feminism’ that focused on sexual desire, consumerism and an individual pathway.<sup>8</sup> Sexuality was more compelling than romance.

4 Conway, *The road from Coorain*, p. 172.

5 Heilbrun, *Hamlet’s mother and other women*, p. xi.

6 Ibid.

7 Boyd, ‘Sister act’.

8 E.g. Natasha Walter, *The new feminism*, Little, Brown and Co, London, 1998.

What will happen to these young women as they age? As life in the fast lane palls? As they try to combine their brilliant careers with a partner and children? Heilbrun claimed that ‘the future of feminism does not lie with the young but rather with the grey battalions, whether or not the grey is transformed to a brighter colour’.<sup>9</sup> This may well be true although second wave feminists now hold a place in the eyes of younger women akin to Leland and others in the 1950s. They are now the ‘continuity’. Some younger women, however, on becoming mothers, are beginning to question the challenges of raising children in the hypersexualized culture they themselves previously advocated. They worry that an exaggerated femininity is idealized amongst young girls, that internet porn is available to all.<sup>10</sup>

Elements of the 1950s and early 1960s are also disturbingly present. Some argue that the Cold War never ended<sup>11</sup> or that the war on terrorism has become the new Cold War. Certainly the strangely named War on Terror brought back into both US and Australian society a narrowing of discourse, a defensiveness about intellectual debate, a worrying increase in surveillance. Schools and universities were targeted as too left-leaning. In Australia school curricula that made issues such as social justice and ecological sustainability central were deemed ideological by a former federal education minister, who compared them with the time of Chairman Mao.<sup>12</sup> Teachers are publicly derided for teaching feminist, postmodern or social-class-based critiques in English studies. The term ‘politically correct’ has been given a new life – a stick with which to beat progressive teachers. Conservative think tanks flourish. In the US, until the election of

9 Heilbrun, *Hamlet's mother and other women*, p. xii.

10 Natasha Walter, *Living dolls: the return of sexism*, Virago, London, 2010. See also Rosemary Neill, ‘Feminists in anti-raunch-culture revolt’, *The Weekend Australian*, 13–14 March 2010, in section ‘The Nation’, p. 3, on Mia Freedman, formerly Australian editor-in-chief of *Cosmopolitan*, *Cleo* and *Dolly*, who is ‘turning against the 21st century excesses of the “free love” culture [she] once embraced’.

11 Peter Love, ‘Australia’s Cold War’ in Love and Strangio (eds), *Arguing the Cold War*.

12 See ‘The world today’, ABC Radio, 6 October 2006.

President Obama, it took a brave liberal to speak out against the strong neo-con consensus, fuelled by the religious right. If, as Jacqueline Rose argues, there was a Cold War logic that linked the intelligentsia with communism, ‘as the joint threats to the free and homespun values of American democracy and the American mind’,<sup>13</sup> a ‘War on Terror’ logic seeks to implicate liberals (in US parlance), or left-leaning progressives in Australia, in similar threats. For many of those who fought the battles of the 1960s the barbarians seem well and truly at the gate.

Although we have not yet seen a return of the mass signing of loyalty oaths, debate on the need for new citizens to adopt the values of their new countries is rife, even if there is considerable doubt as to what those values might be. Dissent is labelled ‘anti-American’ or ‘un-Australian’. We are no longer urged to ‘dob in a pinko’ but to report any suspicious activity around us, to see terrorists lurking in our midst. Those who seek a nuanced understanding of Islamic culture or who press for peace risk being viewed as this century’s version of fellow travellers. We might well remember the Canoga Park case in both Australia and the US. In such a climate the pursuit of career and family goals, of material security and keeping one’s head down makes much sense.

In 1953 Alison Prentice expressed her concerns for college rules – and her boyfriend’s disdain for them:

Also relates to the feeling that Tony was telling you about – the complete indifference of boys (in his opinion) to grades, rules, systems, or pressures of society. People seem on the verge of beginning to ignore such impediments – an idea that ‘what difference does it make how well I achieve something – I’ll spend the next four years in Korea anyway’.<sup>14</sup>

The threat of national service hung over the young men of the period. Do we feel an echo of that time as we experience tensions on the Korean peninsula again, war in Afghanistan and unrest in Iran?

13 Jacqueline Rose, *The haunting of Sylvia Plath*, Virago, London, 1991, p. 196.

14 Prentice letters, private collection, February 1953.

Consumer culture lures young women even more. Throughout the western world images of thin women, with gym-sculpted bodies and large accessories await the young woman as she emerges from the chrysalis of her studies. But, importantly, she does not have to await a male purchaser. Glossy magazines suggest she can buy her own diamond, manage her own credit card and phone account. She has come a long way, baby. She is an equal consumer.

## What has changed?

It would be wrong to claim that little has changed. The sheer numbers of women who enrol in university courses, win prestigious prizes, enter highly esteemed professions and engage in the political system indicate the success of those alumnae of the 1950s and early 60s who fought for broader fields of action for women. We look sympathetically now at women who confess in interviews: ‘I would have begged, borrowed or stolen to go to medical school’; ‘I would like to have had a law degree for my own personal betterment, [for] the feeling of accomplishment, of achievement, of doing something and getting it done. For personal satisfaction.’ ‘It’s probably superficial’, one woman reflected of her past, ‘but I think I’d prepare myself for a real career’.<sup>15</sup> Then we know that times have changed. Feminism allied with civil rights movements and sustained economic growth – for all but the poor, or the socially excluded as they are now called – has changed the face of the English-speaking world. Developments in reproductive technology, the birth control pill, IVF, and child care offer educated women vast choices as to whether and when they will have a baby – and with whom. Sexual liberation (a still contested concept) enables them to reclaim their full sexuality, to experiment: to defer that leap into marriage that was once the only sanctioned pathway to

15 Interviews for ‘Graduating in the fifties’ project.

sex. Gay and lesbian couples live openly and adopt or produce children, although they are often excluded from reproductive technologies. Some mourn the loss of altruism, that virtue born of time on their hands for middle-class women.<sup>16</sup>

Young women are supremely confident: two young college alumnae looked forward with hope, one stating that if dating does not work out, then standing on her own feet was a good option thanks to her excellent education. Another claimed: 'Today's Smithies are not presidents' wives; we are presidents of our own companies'.<sup>17</sup>

Hard-won legislation has secured critical gains in education and the workplace. Landmark acts such as the *Equal Employment Opportunity Act* of 1972 and the *Educational Amendments Act* in the US, the 1984 *Sex Discrimination Act* and the *Affirmative Action (Equal Opportunity for Women) Act* of 1986 in Australia, ushered in a legal revolution. Half the battle has been won and if we can avoid it being challenged by a resurgent religious right, who would like above all to see *Roe v Wade* overturned and women barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen, it should stand young women in good stead for the years ahead.

### *What has not changed*

But there is the other part of the battle to be fought. In both Australia and the United States the combination of career and child rearing presents insurmountable barriers for women. It is these barriers, in part, that send highly educated middle-class women back to the role of housewife, exhausted by the struggle to be both workers and mothers. Workplaces have not adapted to 'working mothers'. They demand impossibly long hours of both parents; they frequently offer little job security, making decisions to bring children into the world contingent at best. They do not look favourably on interrupted careers. Work is everything, sociologist Ulrich Beck believes:

16 Alison Wolf, 'Working girls', *Prospect Magazine*, 121, April 2006, online.

17 Alexandra Bregman, 'Reconciling the gap between Smith alumnae and alum now', *The Sophian*, 2 April 2010, online.

having lost their faith in God, [people] believe instead in the godlike powers of work to provide everything sacred to them: prosperity, social position, personality, meaning in life, democracy, political cohesion. Just name any value of modernity and I will show that it assumes the very thing about which it is silent: participation in paid work.<sup>18</sup>

For this reason many young women defer child bearing until there is a measure of job security – or at least a salary sufficient to allow for household help. Others are so captivated by the cultural power of the workplace, the ‘religion of capitalism’<sup>19</sup> that they cannot disengage. Yet in spite of that attraction women are still scarce in corporate board rooms and senior academic posts.

How does this compare with the life course of those who completed their degrees in the 1950s and early ’60s? As we have seen many married straight out of college and produced children while still in their twenties. They were young enough, when the call from feminism came – or when suburban *ennui* set in – to begin again, to undertake further study, to reinvent themselves, to take part-time work and begin to build a career. Many formed partnerships at a time when the new birth control pill gave them unprecedented control over the timing of child bearing, indeed over whether they would have children at all. Their identities, caught between the romance plot and the quest plot, were negotiable. Not all made that negotiation to their satisfaction: Alice Gorton Hart regretted the lost opportunities. Their life patterns meshed with the expanding workplace, the growing need for teachers, social workers, psychologists. Consumerism had not yet become the ‘religion of capitalism’, although it was on the way. Did they really have the best of all possible worlds? Looking back I realize the luxury of having spent several years at home with my three young children – although it felt far from luxurious at the time. How many young women now can take six or seven years from their careers and

18 Ulrich Beck, *The brave new world of work*, Polity Press, Oxford, 2002, p. 63.

19 Arlie Hochschild, *The commercialization of intimate life, notes from home and work*, quoted in Barbara Pocock, *The labour market ate my babies*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2006, p. 48.

then choose to return? But then we did not see ourselves as having a 'career' to step out of.

## Not to win freedom but how to use it

'There is', wrote Edna Rostow, 'an inherent if rarely acknowledged contradiction between the traditional idea of marriage and "the emancipation" of women'.<sup>20</sup> Writing in 1964, she imagined a time when the freedom of women would be a threat to marriage 'as we now know it'. Looking at the young women of her time Rostow saw them as willing to compromise, to make accommodation for the obvious conflict. Much of that was achieved by women choosing jobs not careers. Jobs could be abandoned at will: careers, on the other hand, required persistence and nurturing. The challenge for these young women was not to win freedom but how to use it. Too many were 'intellectually underemployed' in an Australian journalist's view.<sup>21</sup> Have we arrived at that time Rostow envisaged – forty six years later? Has the 'emancipation' [sic] of women threatened marriage and the bearing of children? Certainly the marriage rate has dropped in both Australia and the US and the age at marriage has risen. Highly educated women, then as now, marry later than their sisters and are therefore likely to have fewer children as a group. The bearing of children, however, remains a compelling imperative. While we no longer use the terms 'conflict' and 'accommodation', which framed Rostow's essay, we recognize the issues all too well. Rostow believed that the young women who graduated from 'a first class college' of her time were a feminine elite, the wives of a male elite: they were part of

20 Edna Rostow, 'Conflict and accommodation', *Daedalus*, 93(2), 1964, p. 736.

21 Myfanwy Gollan, 'Conversations with my memory' in Jocelynne Scutt (ed.), *Different lives*, Penguin, Ringwood, Vic, 1987, p. 170.

a vanguard, self-conscious and articulate in thought and feeling, purposeful and active, whose behaviour and attitudes are not only intrinsically important, but are of interest to men and women throughout American society, and indeed, throughout the world ... America is still the prototype (to be accepted or rejected) of what life offers – or becomes – under conditions of affluence and social freedom.<sup>22</sup>

Was America the prototype? A comparison of American and Australian women throughout this book has revealed some interesting contrasts. While college women in both societies experienced the Cold War, the rise of consumerism and increasing socio-psychological assessment they did so to very different degrees. In Australia the Cold War was never as cold. The affluence that shaped middle-class America, bringing both wealth – and anxiety – was slower in coming to Australia where students rarely owned cars or elaborate wardrobes. It would have been rare indeed for an Australian university woman to undergo psychoanalysis for ‘neuroses’ such as weight gain and career confusion. Australia did not have the elite women-only colleges/universities that were emblematic of both the best and the worst of the times. The best certainly, in relation to a proud tradition, to intellectual rigour and pastoral care: the worst, arguably, in that the women’s colleges frequently taught or conveyed the messages of life adjustment that narrowed women’s options and suffocated their emerging ambitions. No courses such as Education for Marriage: General Studies 210, offered from 1952 to 1970 at the University of Southern California, were taught in Australian universities. The hot-house atmosphere of single-sex institutions could both enhance study and focus attention too much on the weekend parties ahead. It is not surprising then that the rallying cry of Betty Friedan’s *The feminine mystique* emerged from the students of an elite woman’s college.

Women entered the professions of medicine and law through different pathways in Australia and the United States. Australian women entered medical and law courses straight from high school, albeit in very small numbers. Yet they gained those qualifications and fre-

22 Rostow, ‘Conflict and accommodation’, p. 742.

quently went on to internships and careers without having to undertake a second professional degree after a liberal arts course – and possibly marriage. In the US where individualistic competitive achievement was the standard, gender roles may have been more sharply differentiated.

The triggers for social change were not always the same. The civil rights movement in the US was paramount, although peace activism and anti-nuclear movements played a large part. In Australia the issues to which students rallied were anti-apartheid, Aboriginal rights, the White Australia Policy (which they sought to overturn) and nuclear testing. In both countries the Vietnam War stirred many to resist. Students of both countries then confronted similar moral challenges, similar anxieties and urgent calls for major social change. These calls to action led women to political involvement and ultimately to a realization that within those arenas they were still handmaidens to men. This was the prompt for a renewed women's movement, for the crucial change of consciousness.

Within the prototype that Rostow described role conflict has not diminished although we rarely use that term. Indeed it has increased over time to the extent that it is one of the defining issues for highly educated young women today: the famous work–family dilemma, or the mommy wars in the US. Even a few years on from our end point of 1965, as women's place in the workforce became more widely accepted, women of the class of 1967 were reporting more conflict.<sup>23</sup> The University of Michigan Women's Life Paths study noted that the number reporting conflict rose from one fifth of the sample in 1967 to one third in 1970 to a half in 1981. Curiously those women who were deemed 'role innovative' (ie were working in areas in which fewer than 30 per cent of the workers were women) reported the least conflict.<sup>24</sup> The types of conflict reported included conflicting time demands, conflicts between a couple's dual careers, conflicts related to the demands of the husband's career on his wife, the husband or part-

23 Tangri and Jenkins, 'The University of Michigan class of 1967', p. 269.

24 Ibid.

ner's support, and the husband's or partner's resistance (that dust on the furniture perhaps?). Welcome to the twenty-first century.

A source of the conflict identified by some was their own perfectionism in attempting to bring high performance standards to both home and work. This is the female version of performance anxiety. Tangri and Jenkins cite a college professor with two children, married to a lawyer for ten years, who wrote: 'A working mother is always in a dilemma: Are you doing enough as a mother and professional? ... I am a perfectionist and very demanding and therefore experience a lot of guilt.'<sup>25</sup> She speaks of 'a juggling act' in words that have become a mantra for women today. A Smith College graduate of 1957 wrote in her twenty-fifth reunion survey: 'Another juggler reporting in: wife, mother, career woman, volunteer. Can't stop to write or I might drop something.'<sup>26</sup> Jill Ker Conway was not immune from these anxieties as she worked on her PhD dissertation: 'I was not only anxious about whether I could write anything of substance, I also had to grapple with the inner need to perform as a superb housewife to justify my career'.<sup>27</sup> Guilt has now been sharpened to a knife edge: young women consume more and more commodities for their children to compensate for not being there – but the guilt remains.

The University of Michigan class of '67 reported more conflict between marriage (or child rearing) and career than they had anticipated as they finished their degrees. But then again, in most areas – marriage, child bearing, occupational choice and tendency to go on to graduate degrees – their lives differed from their expectations. That is what makes a transitional generation, a 'swing bridge' cohort, and attracts the interest of social science researchers.

25 Ibid.

26 Smith College, Class of 57, 25th reunion survey (typescript), 21–23 May 1982.

27 Conway, *True north*, p. 91.

*Role conflict: a concept whose time has passed?*

Has the idea of role conflict any purchase today? Alice Yohalem questioned the extent of role conflict in her work on very highly educated women, 'women of superior scholastic aptitude who pursued advanced education'.<sup>28</sup> Referring to women aged in their late 40s and early 50s in 1974 (the time of the interviews) she finds little evidence of pronounced conflict between demands of career and family. Many of these high-achieving women had developed strategies to maintain their careers, limiting family size, working part-time to keep up with skills and re-entering the labour market as soon as possible. They seem to have advanced, in her view, 'despite male obstructiveness rather than because of male assistance'.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore few of them wanted to retire at 65; those whose work patterns had been discontinuous showed a particular desire to enjoy their 'revived careers'.

This suggests that the advanced education these high-achieving women had undertaken had exempted them from the norms of their time. What would exempt women today? In Yohalem's group women with advanced higher education were rare. As more and more young women in Australia and the United States now acquire a PhD, an MBA and higher professional qualifications, what do they have to do to achieve exemption? Due to the hard work of earlier feminists many of the norms have changed. It is no longer mandatory to privilege a partner's career, for example. At this point attitude is as important as qualification. An informed and determined resistance to society's expectations, to its contradictory messages, is the critical element in today's world, a resistance that young women could strengthen through a study of women's recent past.

We now view role conflict as an indictment of both Australian and American society's inability to structure its workplace to fit the realities of educated women's lives. The notion served to displace any difficulties onto the woman concerned, making her responsible

28 Yohalem, *The careers of professional women*, p. 189.

29 p. 194.

through guilt, performance anxiety and sheer overwork for the wider society's inadequacies. What some have called role conflict is the mismatch between a society that pours resources into educating women, but fails to supply the resources to allow her to put that education, those high level skills, to work. Inevitably the solution for women with high 'achievement motivation' now is to restrict family size, sometimes indeed to forgo child bearing completely, a fact that demographers know all too well, and that Rostow predicted.

As people live longer and are likely to be in paid work at even later ages, let us offer them the chance to take several years out – a 'moratorium' – at a time when they wish to put their energies into partnerships and family building. We are, as Barbara Pocock points out, on a 'collision course'.<sup>30</sup> As people have fewer children we produce a population slanted to the ageing. We then need more and more of our diminishing cohort of young people to be in the labour market. But if they are there, with the voracious demands of professional careers, how can they have the children to provide the coming cohort of workers? It is a double bind – a bind as perplexing as that which faced the women of the 1950s and 60s. This is the challenge for twenty-first century women.

Because we passed this way ...

'Some things were different because we passed this way', claims Alix Kates Shulman.<sup>31</sup> But others are depressingly the same. Do we have to think like men to become part of the power structure? How did Jill Ker Conway come to be 'chairman' of a large public company, Lend Lease, in 2000? In a newspaper interview she spelt out her way of

30 Barbara Pocock, *The work/life collision: what work is doing to Australians and what to do about it*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2003.

31 Alix Kates Shulman, *Burning questions: a novel*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 1978, p. 358.

beating men at their own game. 'One of the things I encourage women in management to do is to take a course in military history, take a course in corporate strategy, watch those wretched football games every weekend and learn the language', she is quoted as saying to a group of 350 women.<sup>32</sup> Margaret Mead claimed that in US culture boys were unsexed by failure, girls by success.<sup>33</sup> The legions of young professional women, confident and aspiring, give the lie to that idea. Those who despaired in the 1950s that women would never be *persons* again – Marine Leland, Alice Rossi and Mary Bunting – can take heart.

We are not walking into the future blindfolded. We know that if we continue with current social arrangements we may well end up with two classes of women. The first will be the highly educated, highly paid professionals who marry late if at all and have one or two children. The second will be an underclass of young prolific mothers akin to the breeders of Margaret Atwood's dystopian imagination.<sup>34</sup> We already see signs of this pattern. And, as Heilbrun pointed out, many college women are retreating to the suburbs. There is a curious reversion to women taking their husbands' names on marriage – a sign of greater confidence or of a retreat to tradition?

Do we ever escape the generation into which we are born? The college women of the 1950s and early 60s married early in the main, although later than their non-college sisters. They had children early and returned to part-time work when their children went to school. Grasping the new opportunities in the expanding workforce and the possibility of controlling fertility, many went on to lifelong successful careers. This pattern has much to recommend it, if social arrangements allow women to return at their own pace. Some societies, such as those of the Scandinavian countries, have shown the way. Yet, as we have seen, others exempted themselves from that typical pattern, remaining single, marrying late, remaining childless, allowing themselves time and experience to lead their cohort. Those in lesbian rela-

32 Andrew White, 'Above the glass ceiling', *The Australian*, 20 January 2000, p. 28.

33 Cited in Rostow, 'Conflict and accommodation', p. 743.

34 Margaret Atwood, *The handmaid's tale*, Virago, London, 1987.

tionships escaped the marriage expectations of the day while at the same time risking disapproval and suspicion.

Have we killed off the Freud in our heads? The guilt that burdened so many of the 50s graduates still lurks, as studies (often spurious) of the impact of child care on the growing brain lead young mothers into doubt and guilt. Perhaps the fact that far fewer are studying education and psychology will save them from this fate. Business studies and law do not give much emphasis to early childhood development. College women's insecurities about their appearance and sexuality have not diminished. At the sorority rushes of the 1990s young women fresh from high school sought polished perfection in clothes, hairstyle and make up, in order to attract attention, adhering to the (unspoken) rules of desirability.

Who will become the new feminists for the next phase? Alison Wolf has argued that individualism has led to the death of sisterhood.<sup>35</sup> It is each for her own. Yet through the internet and social networking young women form collectives, and build a new politics. How did some women escape the prescriptions of the time? There was always a small group who forged ahead totally unaware, or unmoved by how they were meant to be. It was often the 'outsiders' who led the way in the 1950s and early '60s: the scholarship girls, those whose fathers had urged them on, those who did not marry or have children. Black women in the US frequently outnumbered black men in gaining degrees and led the way in combining work and family. Demographics may well set the scene for the next phase. As the younger generation shrinks and workers are needed for every level of the workforce, the growing legions of educated women will gain a new bargaining power. That is the moment to insist on the conditions they want.

If they are to work until the age of 70, as pundits predict, why not have ten years out from the age of twenty-five to thirty-five – a young adult moratorium for both men and women – to travel, to have babies, to experiment with their lives. Earlier we saw that Jill Ker Conway realized at thirty-three that she was to be a scholar: 'history was what I

35 Wolf, 'Working girls'.

did and would do for the rest of my life'. She believed that 'a woman develops her sense of her working self on a different time trajectory from that of a man'. Conway's argument is persuasive: 'because society defines children as a woman's responsibility, she needs to clarify what her reproductive life will be, and whether she is to be single or a member of a partnership'.<sup>36</sup> Let us allow young women that time out. There are many seasons in a woman's life.

So let us set the fifties and early sixties to rest, remembering those who broke free from the expectations of the times, and those who did not quite manage to do so, and looked back with regret. Some have turned back towards the religion they set aside in the frantic '70s. Mary Goldsmith, the inveterate student, is studying theology. Some, like Pam Cleland, have returned to art; others to music. Some, like Gloria Steinem, have turned to spirituality and meditation, echoes, perhaps, of that Indian experience? Alison Prentice practises yoga and advocates for peace and justice on Canada's west coast. Germaine Greer is still waiting for the women's revolution to begin.<sup>37</sup> Some, after active and distinguished careers, have returned to the preoccupations of an earlier time. Jill Ker Conway writes about women's lives. Inga Clendinnen enjoys 'the magical arts of History'<sup>38</sup> and of fiction and writes magnificently about the struggles and indignities of life-threatening illness. And I, putting behind me thirty-five years of academic life, what shall I do? Where once I dreamed of being the secretary of a famous writer I now aspire to *be* a writer. Because they passed this way ...

36 Conway, *True north*, p. 148.

37 Germaine Greer, 'Better half still battling', *The Australian Literary Review*, 5 May 2010.

38 Inga Clendinnen, transcript of interview for Australian Biography Project.

# A note on sources and method

## Sources

I have consulted a wide range of sources for this book. As well as literary sources – histories, biographies, autobiographies, articles and personal papers – a wide range of other archival sources have proved invaluable. Some are listed below. My aim was not to cover all possible sources on this wide topic – such a task would have been impossible – but to gain a flavour of undergraduate life and life after college in both Australia and the US for women who attended institutions of higher education in the 1950s and early 1960s. Not surprisingly it was not always possible to find parallels in each country. For example the wonderful reunion questionnaires and printed reunion books that exist in several women’s colleges in the US (e.g. Smith College, Radcliffe College and Wellesley College) have no equivalent in Australia. I decided, however, to consult them for their particular insights, realizing that I would not have a similar set of ‘frozen in time’ records for Australian women.

I did, however, have much wider access to interviews with Australian women and I have drawn on this source more than on interviews with US graduates. So although there is no exact ‘equivalence’ in the manner of the social sciences I am satisfied that I have canvassed a wide range of views. This group of women was the object of wide social interest for a number of reasons explored in the text. Hence there were many surveys that purported to anatomize their lives. I have drawn on the surveys widely often as much for the questions asked as for the responses. The questions themselves present a picture of the period and its preoccupations. I see all these sources as ‘texts’ to be interpreted rather than as data in any scientific sense.

## *Surveys*

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### *United States*

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E. Lowell Kelly Longitudinal Study (1935–1955).

Kathleen Hulbert and Marilyn Schuster, *Women's lives through time* contains accounts of several longitudinal studies (e.g. Yohalem, Pacini and Brown, Sicherman).

Also many alumnae surveys for regular class reunions from Radcliffe College, Smith College and Wellesley College. These surveys, while far from scientific, offer an invaluable snapshot of a 'year group' as a cohort as it progresses through life after college.

### *Interviews*

#### *Australia*

Approximately 30 interviews conducted by the author and research assistant Penny Gregory in Melbourne and Adelaide. Those interviewed were, in the main, respondents to the *Graduating in the fifties* questionnaire who had volunteered to be interviewed.

#### *United States*

Several interviews conducted by the author in Austin, Texas; Victoria, BC, Canada; and Boston.

#### *Reunion books*

From Smith College, Radcliffe College and Wellesley College. I consulted some Harvard reunion books for a comparison between the way in which men's colleges and women's colleges undertook their surveys and reporting. The Harvard publications had clearly had more money spent on them – they were glossy, substantial publications unlike those of the women's colleges.

## *University student publications*

I consulted publications such as student newspapers, yearbooks and occasional publications from Melbourne and Adelaide universities; from Smith College, Radcliffe College, University of Texas at Austin, and University of California (Berkeley).

## Method: collective biography, prosopography or memoir?

There is considerable debate about prosopography, the notion of collective but individual biography. Prosopography has been defined as a history that allows the political history of individuals and events to be combined with the hidden social history of long-term evolutionary processes. It has also been seen as the investigation of the common characteristics of a historical group by the means of a collective study of their lives. Thus prosopographical research attempts to uncover meaningful patterns of relationships and activities by collecting and analyzing statistically relevant quantities of biographical data about a well-defined group of individuals. It may then reveal the genesis of political action.

By these criteria this book might be seen as an example of the genre. It draws upon statistically relevant quantities of data from varied studies, rather than setting up a statistical study *de novo*. Certainly it is the study of biographical detail about individuals *in aggregate*. It aims to establish not a series of individual biographies but an aggregate understanding of the era – one that can illuminate the evolution of political action, in this case feminism, and the women's liberation movement of the 1970s. I see this group as part of an evolutionary process of change – one that has been attributed to a few key individuals: Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer, for example. Thus it situates those well-known women within a wider process of change, one that was already underway when their famous books caught the

imaginations of many women. But rather than use the little-known term prosopography I would prefer to describe it as a collective biography. The group described here can be seen as a cohort, a specific group whose exact historic context was different from those who came before and after. As I am part of that cohort inevitably there is a flavour too of memoir as I remember my younger self in this now distant era.

Margaret Rossiter has argued that some early collective biographies were ‘a muted form of vocational guidance, portraying the lives of women in science [for example] to inspire the young as well as inform the public’.<sup>1</sup> I have some such hopes for this volume; that ‘the young’ might read about the generation before them and take from them some reflections about how to combine a life of love and learning.

1 Rossiter, *Women scientists in America*, p. 534.



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# Index

- academic careers, women in, 144, 147, 150, 160, 169, 175–179, 203, 211, 223
- Adelaide, University of, 39–40, 156
- advertising, 23, 31, 89, 92, 114
- American Association of University Women, 80–83, 86–88, 178–179, 210
- anthropology, 34, 36, 137, 151
- anti-communism, 23, 67, 69–74, 76–79, 81, 83–86, 88–89, 96, 100, 118, 121, 215–216
- anti-intellectualism, 29, 70, 73, 79, 82–83, 91, 105–106, 194, 215–216
- Associated Women Students, 46
- attractiveness, 17, 20, 23, 26, 39–40, 51–52, 90, 105–107, 111, 113, 214, 217, 227
- Australia and US, differences, 21–22, 72, 118, 137, 148, 155, 171–173, 221–222
- Australian Federation of University Women, 202, 210
- Australian National University, 213
- Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation, 70–71, 73–75, 77
- Banner, Lois, 22, 39, 46, 48, 79, 123, 138–139
- Barnard College, 76, 130
- beauty contests, 37–39
- behaviour, control of, 16, 41–44, 63, 92–94
- birth control pill, 14, 94, 97, 148, 159, 217, 219
- birthrates, 60–61, 149
- body image, 37, 41, 95, 109–113, 167, 198, 217
- Bogle, Gilbert, 65–66, 97, 99
- California at Berkeley, University of, 14–15, 39, 42, 44–46, 78–79
- California at Los Angeles, University of, 22, 46, 49, 68, 79, 162
- Cambridge University, 156, 200
- Canoga Park case, 84–86, 89, 216
- Chandler, Margaret, 65–66, 97, 99
- Chicago, University of, 191
- child bearing, 13, 57, 60–61, 63, 132–133, 143, 149, 159, 165–167, 173, 217, 219–220, 225–226, 228
- child rearing, 15, 19, 26, 50, 144, 150–151, 179, 197, 201, 207–210, 215, 218, 223, 227
- civil rights movement, 14, 22, 83, 166, 170, 181–182, 195, 217, 222
- cohort, 17–18, 233
- Cold War, 16, 22, 66–89, 93, 96, 103, 121, 125, 148, 215–216, 221
- Columbia University, 60, 101, 148–149
- communism, 68–72, 75, 124–126, 134, 186  
*see also* anti-communism
- consumerism, 23, 67, 89–90, 92–93, 103, 148, 214, 217, 219, 221
- Conway, Jill Ker, 20, 29–32, 47–48, 62–63, 73, 94, 98, 102, 122, 136, 163, 179–180, 182, 199–203, 214, 223, 225–228
- curfews, 41–44, 46, 118
- dating, 30, 45, 92–93, 107–109, 112–113, 117–119, 218

- Dawson, Madge, 60, 62, 91, 144–145, 147–148, 151–152, 155, 166, 168, 171–174, 176, 178
- defence forces, 82, 130–131, 185, 216  
veterans, 115, 128, 136, 153–154
- demographers, 14, 18, 57, 60, 225
- depression, 53, 166
- diaries, 94–95, 101, 109–112, 140, 157, 183, 198–199, 211
- divorce, 51, 54, 165, 170, 173
- doctors, 137, 150–152, 209, 221
- domestic labour, 26, 61–62, 178–179
- economic boom, 17, 19, 70, 128, 148, 217, 221
- equal pay, 24, 26, 77, 151, 197, 207, 209
- Factor, June, 73, 118–119, 129, 133, 138
- fashion, 13, 19, 40, 43, 62, 90, 98, 133–134–135, 201, 213–214
- feminism, 14, 16, 18, 20–21, 23–26, 33, 41, 54, 56–57, 67–68, 75–76, 80, 102, 117, 131, 140–141, 146, 149, 166, 170, 180–181, 184, 190–191, 194, 196–198, 201, 203–210, 214–215, 217, 222, 224, 227, 232
- free speech movement, 14, 46, 195
- Freud, Sigmund, 16, 47–48, 55, 94, 100, 108, 182, 194, 196, 227
- Friedan, Betty, 14, 16, 48, 100–102, 145, 189, 197, 208, 221, 232
- graduate degrees, 13, 58, 60–61, 111, 143–144, 147, 150, 155, 160, 169, 176–177, 223–224
- Greer, Germaine, 14, 16, 20, 97, 101, 134–136, 140, 197, 200, 203, 208, 228, 232
- Hart, Alice Gorton, 94–95, 139–140, 196, 198–199, 211, 219
- Harvard University, 30–31, 33, 127, 129, 180
- higher degrees (graduate degrees), 13, 58, 60–61, 111, 143–144, 147, 150, 155, 160, 169, 176–177, 223–224
- Indiana University, 44
- Intercollegiate Associated Women Students, 41
- International Federation of University Women, 24, 32, 84, 210
- interviews, 51, 115–118, 122, 143–144, 146, 151, 163–164, 167, 194, 197, 202, 217, 229
- Jewish women, 25, 173–174
- labour movement, 67–68, 71–72, 76, 115, 117, 123–125
- lawyers, 15, 38, 129, 133, 137, 150–151, 194, 197, 209, 221
- learning for pleasure, 13, 25, 115, 136, 138–140
- Leland, Marine, 82, 192–193
- letters to family, 35–36, 107–109, 115, 123–128, 136, 139, 141, 181
- letters to friends, 82, 187, 192–193
- Lewis, Nancy, 31, 59, 132, 189–190, 193
- longitudinal studies, 33, 49, 51–56, 100, 144, 152, 158, 162, 164–166, 168–170, 172–173, 209, 222
- Louisiana State University, 38
- Mademoiselle*, 45, 95, 102, 131, 182–185, 187, 203
- marriage, 13, 15, 19, 23–24, 26, 31–33, 45, 49, 53–55, 60–62, 75, 87, 91, 93–94, 98, 101, 106, 109, 112, 128–133, 145, 152, 156, 159, 161, 166–167, 170–173, 175, 178–179, 184–185, 189–190, 192–193, 196, 198, 200,

207, 209–211, 217, 219–220, 222–224, 226, 228  
 age at, 58–59, 149  
 Mead, Margaret, 48, 151, 194, 226  
 Melbourne, University of, 14, 19, 21, 39, 71–73, 76, 92, 116–119, 122, 129, 133–134, 147, 182  
 Michigan, University of, 44, 48, 172, 223  
 Mills College, 94, 99, 164–168, 170  
 Mitchell, Roma, 194  
 Monash University, 147  
  
 Neumann, Anne Rittershofer, 126–128  
 neuroses, 16, 23, 30, 93, 131, 221  
 Newnham College, 32  
  
 Orr, Sydney Sparkes, 73, 97–99, 120–121  
  
 Payne-Scott, Ruby, 74–75  
 peace movement, 71–72, 77–78, 80, 181–182, 195, 222  
 Pembroke College, 31, 132, 189  
 Pennsylvania University, 112  
 Plath, Sylvia, 16, 20, 36, 94–95, 102, 106, 112, 121, 135–136, 140–141, 156, 183–184, 199–200, 203, 210  
 posture photos, 34–37  
 pregnancy, 25, 44, 75, 94, 98, 133  
 Prentice, Alison, 35, 123–125, 139, 167, 189, 201–203, 216, 228  
 psychology, 19, 23, 31–33, 47–50, 63, 100, 108, 129–130, 137, 161, 167–168, 190–191, 204, 221, 227  
 ‘Push’, the, 20, 97–99, 203  
  
 race, 14, 21–22, 44–45, 69–70, 77–78, 83, 108, 124, 166, 189, 222, 227  
 Radcliffe College, 34, 90, 129–130, 163, 177, 182–185, 193, 204–205, 209  
 rebels, 13–14, 90, 106, 135, 214  
 religion, 63, 69–70, 118, 173–174, 182, 208, 216, 218  
  
 role conflict, 33, 47, 49–55, 161–163, 179, 191, 222–225  
 romance, 17, 19, 95–96, 105–107, 112, 128, 214  
 Rossi, Alice, 23–24, 191–193  
  
 Scarritt College, 81  
 schools, 84–87, 116, 173  
 scientists, 66, 74–75, 129, 137, 169, 175–177, 197  
 sexual assault, 121  
 sexual harassment, 73–74, 98–99, 120–121  
 sexual objectification, 26, 40–41  
 sexuality, 22, 30, 53, 55–57, 65–66, 92–100, 102–103, 107, 120, 193–194, 205, 214–215, 217, 226–227  
     control of, 16, 92–94  
     homosexuality, 22, 93–94, 96, 99–100, 193, 218, 226–227  
 Smith College, 13, 14, 35, 68, 82, 87–88, 100–102, 106–110, 122–123, 125–127, 139–140, 183, 186, 192, 196, 199, 203, 213, 218, 223  
 smoking, 43, 107, 113–115  
 social workers, 15, 56, 151  
 sociology, 23, 33, 63, 108, 129, 137, 191  
 Sontag, Susan, 195, 204, 213  
 sororities, 45–46, 106  
 Southern California, University of, 221  
 Stanford University, 130, 181  
 St Ann’s College, 40, 42, 44  
 Steinem, Gloria, 20, 114, 123, 185–189, 197, 203, 228  
 Student Christian Movement, 22, 118, 195  
 student protest/activism, 15, 46, 68–69, 117–119, 125, 181, 188  
 success, avoidance of, 33, 47, 61, 172, 193, 226  
 suicide, 16, 20, 25, 102, 135  
 surveys, 32, 91, 100, 123, 131, 146, 171, 204–208, 223, 229

Sydney, University of, 21, 59, 62, 73, 91, 168, 172, 176, 202

Tasmania, University of, 73–74, 97–98, 182

teachers, 19–21, 23, 77–78, 84–87, 89, 116, 129, 156, 158–159, 203, 207–208, 215

Texas, University of, 37–38, 43–45, 90, 128–129

therapy, 23, 100–103, 112, 221

travel, 110, 122–126, 131, 160, 186–189, 201–202

UNESCO, 24, 210

United Nations, 46, 83, 88, 184

Vassar College, 50, 168–171, 209

Vietnam War, 15, 222

Wellesley College, 34, 82, 171

Women’s Bureau (US), 75, 81

women’s colleges, 13, 22, 35, 117, 131, 155, 171, 221

    self-government, 42–43

*see also* Radcliffe College, Smith College, etc.

Women’s Dormitory Associations, 42, 44, 46

women’s magazines, 89, 91

*see also* *Mademoiselle*

Woodcock, Lucy, 77–78, 80

workforce, women in, 17, 20, 23, 50, 62, 74–76, 137, 144–145, 149–152, 156–158, 160–161, 168, 170–171, 176–180, 210, 218–220, 222–227

working-class women, 20, 48, 116

yearbooks, 15, 37, 39, 46