

‘The Keystone of the Arch’: University Education and the Leadership of Early Women Graduates

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Abstract: Women who graduated from Australian universities in the earliest years often felt a sense of mission in passing on the benefits of their education to subsequent generations. As teachers, medical doctors and welfare reformers they began the long process of transforming the lives of women and children. We can take pride today in their achievements in educating women and girls, an area in which Australia excels. In the areas of economic participation, health and political empowerment their efforts often blazed a trail but there is still a long journey for later women graduates to continue. A focus on early women graduates raises questions both about the timeframes we might consider as ‘early’ and about leadership. Did participation in a professional area where no women had previously worked, for instance in public hospitals or legal practice, constitute leadership or does such a term require an active grasping of activities which we now see as constituting leadership?

Keywords: women graduates, higher education, university education, university women, educational leadership, leadership cohort

In 1898 Alice Zimmern, educationalist and suffragist, wrote of women’s admission to universities in Great Britain: ‘it is the keystone of the arch, without which the rest of the fabric could have neither stability nor permanence’.¹ Feminists such as Zimmern, a graduate of Girton College, Cambridge, held out great hopes for university-educated women to play an equal part in the world’s affairs. Catherine Helen Spence, across the world in Adelaide, South Australia, also held high hopes for graduate women. However, Spence claimed to be disappointed in the first university-educated women in her state, referring to ‘the aloofness of people with degrees and professions from the preventable evils of the world’² She made an exception for women doctors who, she felt, had shown a sense of responsibility to those less fortunate.

Spence’s judgement seems unnecessarily harsh. The first generations of university women in Australia made significant contributions to their societies, not only in relation to women and children’s lives, as they had been expected to do, but in wider fields such as medicine and law.

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My task is to write about the leadership of ‘early women graduates’. This immediately raises interesting questions: Who were the early graduates? At what point does the category ‘early women graduates’ cease to apply? I have written about women in Australian universities who graduated before 1920 as early women graduates.³ Yet if we consider such academic fields as engineering, technology and computer science arguably women are still ‘early graduates’, the few blazing a trail for the (hopefully) many to follow. And Indigenous students, female and male are still ‘early graduates’, their small numbers signalling ‘firsts’ and are matters for great rejoicing.

Women were admitted to Australian universities from the 1880s. Melbourne graduate Bella Guerin was the first woman to take an Australian degree, a degree in Arts, followed closely in 1885 by Edith Emily Dornwell who graduated from Adelaide University in Science. Two Sydney women, Isola Florence Thompson and Mary Elizabeth Brown, graduated from the University of Sydney later in 1885. These young graduates were feted for their achievements, the long struggle for their admission overlooked. Yet their path to university admission was not as lengthy or as bitter as it had been in England as the state-funded, secular Australian institutions were less influenced by conservative clergy and more responsive to arguments for increasing numbers. Women were eager to augment the small numbers in universities. They had been preparing for this in the academic girls’ schools that flourished from the 1870s. Daughters of middle-class professionals, clergy, teachers and university professors were well represented. Women’s enrolments steadily increased with gradual acceptance in the faculties of medicine (the first medical graduates in 1883) and law, although they had to wait until the 1950s to enter engineering. From tiny beginnings women were 18 per cent of undergraduates by 1949, nearly 45 per cent by the 1980s and over 50 per cent in 2012. Although women undergraduates now outnumber males on Australian campuses it is only as recently as the 1980s that women in postgraduate degrees began to approximate male numbers. In a sense, some women are still early graduates – the term ‘early’ expressing their difference, their unexpectedness in what has always been a male domain.

Were those earliest graduates leaders? Another puzzle surrounds the idea of the leadership of early women graduates. Is leadership always an individual attribute? Is it the same as being a pioneer in a particular faculty or profession? Are particular leadership qualities necessary for one to qualify? Is it essential to have a sense of oneself as a leader? Few early graduates wrote autobiographies, for example, although many left copious letters. Few had a strong individual sense of themselves as leaders, as apart from others. Such a recognition flew in the face of female identity of the time, an identity which usually valued working with others, not setting oneself apart. Many are familiar with the few great women leaders of the early years of the century –

in South Australia of Catherine Helen Spence, Mary Lee, Helen Mayo and Roma Mitchell to name but four.⁴ They are widely acknowledged leaders in the fields of politics, suffrage, medicine and the law, although in Lee's case recognition did not flow in her lifetime. But can we speak of a cohort of leaders, a group whose joint work at a particular time changed the shape of women's lives irrevocably?

I suggest that cohorts should indeed be acknowledged as leaders. This is an approach that many early graduates would have felt comfortable with. We could for instance see all early women graduates as a cohort of leaders although some distinction needs to be made between leaders and pioneers in a profession, between those who grasped the opportunities to lead and others who merely inhabited such positions by virtue of 'being there'. We could also focus on the cohort of early women graduates who became secondary school teachers. Many devoted their lives to ensuring that the next generation of girls received an education similar to that of their brothers, that they were well prepared for university entry and for the professions. In girls' private schools, in larger corporate schools and in the state education system the earliest cohorts of women graduates, particularly those who graduated in Arts and Science, became teachers. Their motives were mixed. For many, particularly in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, this was a mission and they spurned other options – often marriage and children – to pursue their goals. Others became teachers through lack of alternative opportunities, or as an option to combine paid work with marriage and child rearing. Graduates were keenly sought by secondary schools, both public and private, and generations of women heeded that call – until the 1970s when women's career options broadened. If one explores the careers of many well-known graduates throughout the twentieth century there will be a period of school teaching at some stage. The expansion of high schools in the 1950s and 1960s brought new possibilities, such as departmental teaching studentships in some Australian states. These offered a pathway to women who may not otherwise have found a way into the university – with a few years of school teaching a small price to pay at the end. Through leadership positions as principals and senior mistresses and as 'rank and file' graduate staff within schools, women opened the doors for generations of girl who were to follow. They raised standards and provided role models for schoolgirls. Yet, strangely, teachers as a group are not often widely viewed as women leaders – except, perhaps, in individual school histories that acknowledge the work of some who served for decades, making the school their life's work.

Arguably those schoolteachers who educated girls in the 1890s, 1900s and 1910s were indeed doing what Zimmern recognised was necessary – using their education as a keystone in the arch. In large numbers, and often without great acknowledgement, they institutionalised serious academic

education for women and girls. And they have been very successful in educating women over the century. Consider, for example, Australia's position as reported in the recent *Global Gender Gap Report* (2011). Australia sat at number one position in a league table of 135 countries in relation to the education of women and girls. That success reflects many generations of effort to educate women and girls – effort in which early and more recent women graduates played a part. We can take considerable pride in it. Yet education is not enough. Early women graduates realised that they would need to put their education to good use to ensure political empowerment, economic participation for women and influential positions in welfare and health.⁵

While keeping in mind the leadership of highly educated women as a group – and a group furthermore who founded and joined many influential organisations (the Australian Federation of University Women, for example) the lives of two or three individuals who played a major role in various domains demonstrate the power education brought in the struggle to challenge male dominance.

Education

As we have seen, a considerable cohort of early graduates became teachers. Some stand out, their life work well documented. Ellen Ida Benham exemplifies the early woman graduate as teacher. A solicitor's daughter and third of eleven children, Benham was educated at the pioneering state high school in South Australia, the Advanced School for Girls. She graduated from the University of Adelaide with a Bachelor of Science in 1892 and taught at several schools in both country South Australia and in Adelaide interspersed with two periods of study abroad. On one of these she obtained the Oxford Diploma of Education. An excellent botanist, Benham also conducted a course of lectures at the University of Adelaide. In 1912 she purchased Walford School in Adelaide, a girls' school still highly regarded in educational and social circles. Benham established a school based on the latest ideas of good educational practice and high educational standards. She was undoubtedly a leader in the field of women's education.

In Victoria, Julia Margaret, usually known as Bella, Guerin gained her place for posterity as Australia's first woman graduate. After graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in 1883, Guerin taught at Loreto Convent, Ballarat, and as 'lady principal' of Ballarat School of Mines taught university classes until marriage. A committed suffragist from the mid 1890s, Guerin returned to teaching after her husband's death. As Marjorie Theobald recounts, Bella Guerin 'lived out the worst fears of the opponents of higher education for women'.⁶ She was an independent woman, a strong suffragist, a Yarra Bank orator and, in later life, a socialist and antiwar propagandist. She put her

undoubted talents to use in both suffrage and left-wing causes. Guerin might be said to represent the myriad possibilities of a higher education giving her a voice as teacher, suffragist and political activist. She might equally well sit under the next category: political empowerment.

Political empowerment

Political empowerment can be defined in various ways. If one sees representation on a major international body, and contributions to major international conventions, as an important aspect of political empowerment, both Jessie Street and Mary Cecil Tenison Woods certainly claim a place. Woods (nee Kitson), the first woman to graduate in law (1916) and to be admitted to the bar in South Australia, was committed to child welfare reform, in part due to her own experience as the mother of a disabled child. A practising lawyer, legal scholar and author of influential books on law and juvenile delinquency, Woods was also a member of several advisory bodies on child welfare. From 1950 to 1958 she was chief of the Office of the Status of Women in the Human Rights Division of the United Nations. As her Australian Dictionary of Biography biographer Anne O'Brien points out, during this time two major conventions were adopted: the Political Rights of Women (1952) and the Convention on the Nationality of Married Women (1957). Interestingly, both Bella Guerin and Mary Tenison Woods were educated by Catholic religious, early leaders in the academic education of women and girls whose leadership role is often not sufficiently acknowledged.

Jessie Street (nee Lillingston), feminist and reformer, graduated with a Bachelor of Arts from Sydney University in 1910. As founding president of the United Associations of Women and strong supporter of the Australian Women's Charter, Street shaped Australian women's politics for decades, while managing at times to be out of step with her social class for her Labor politics, and with feminists for her bourgeois roots and campaigning style. She was a keen supporter of women's economic independence, of married women's right to work, of equal pay and of the constitutional rights of Aboriginal people. She is renowned for being the only woman in the Australian delegation to the San Francisco conference that established the United Nations (UN) organisation and for helping found the UN Commission on the Status of Women. Street served on that commission from 1947 to 1948, a predecessor to Mary Tenison Woods, whose politics were diametrically opposed to Street's.⁷

Health

Medical doctors, the group which Spence was prepared to acknowledge as caring for their less fortunate sisters, were the most highly visible early graduates. Their admission not only to universities but also to hospitals and dissecting rooms engendered strident opposition and only the thought that they would mainly treat women and girls smoothed their paths in certain quarters. And care for infants, women and girls they certainly did, establishing hospitals, and infant and maternal healthcare regimes. Several went well beyond that sphere advising on industrial and school health and sexual relations between men and women. Medical women played a large part in women's organisations and were well represented on both the national and international stages as peace activists, campaigners against trafficking in women and children and in supporting women's political rights.

Helen Mayo, Vera Scantlebury Brown, Roberta Jull and Ethel Osborne are but a few of the most prominent whose work made major changes to conditions for women and children. In South Australia Helen Mayo was instrumental in setting up a small clinic to advise mothers. In 1927 this became the Mothers' and Babies' Health Association and eventually served the whole state. In 1913 Mayo and Harriet Stirling opened a small hospital for babies at St Peters which in 1917 became Mareeba Babies' Hospital. Helen Mayo and her colleagues implemented overseas developments in infant feeding and the prevention of cross-infection. Mayo had the great satisfaction of seeing infant mortality decline in South Australia on her watch. In Western Australia Roberta Jull also saw the reduction of infant mortality, in part because of the development of child health centres and infant welfare reform to which she contributed throughout her life. Victorian Vera Scantlebury Brown was another indefatigable pioneer in the fields of infant care, antenatal advice and preschool care. These women doctors promoted the idea of the small but 'quality' family, viewing frequent child bearing as injurious to both mother and child. Jull wrote to her husband after the birth of her daughter: 'I feel constantly on the strain, if you want another you must get another 100 pounds a year and let me have a really competent nurse'. And later, 'I believe in quality not quantity and as you know I doubt if one can have both'.⁸

Ethel Osborne, a science graduate and wife of Melbourne University professor William Alexander Osborne, graduated MBBS from the University of Melbourne when a mother of four. A telling detail in Di Langmore's short biography of Ethel Osborne was that 'Ethel had always been a careless housekeeper' – which clearly shows she had her priorities right.⁹ She also shared the final exhibition in Obstetrics and Gynaecology. Later she completed a Diploma in Public Health. Osborne's long career encompassed not only medical work but also industrial hygiene and working conditions.

Economic participation

Osborne might also be considered under the category of encouraging women's economic participation. During World War I, Osborne worked for the Ministry of Munitions in the United Kingdom, investigating industrial hygiene. As a result she published two major reports in the early 1920s, *Industrial Hygiene as applied to Munition Workers* and, with H.M. Vernon, *Two Contributions to the Study of Accident Causation*.¹⁰ Her investigations into industrial fatigue for the Victorian Government contributed to some women gaining the 44-hour week.¹¹ Less well known than many other medical graduates, Osborne contributed to a wide range of activities and organisations and was a substitute delegate to the League of Nations Assembly in 1931 and 1932.

Dorothea Pavy, nee Proud, was a South Australian teacher and social theorist. In 1906 she graduated with a BA from the University of Adelaide. Always interested in factory work, Dorothea travelled to New Zealand to gain experience in a factory. Like American author Barbara Ehrenreich many decades later she used an assumed name and took a job as an unskilled worker standing from 8.00 am to 4.00 pm each day for the pay of twelve shillings and sixpence.

In 1912 Proud became the first Catherine Helen Spence Scholar, a scholarship endowed to promote the study of sociology among the women of South Australia. In London she began research on welfare work at the London School of Economics, which earned her a doctorate of science in 1916. That work was published as *Welfare Work: Employers' Experiments for Improving Working Conditions in Factories*, a book that went into three editions.¹² It had a rousing endorsement from Lloyd George, then Minister for Munitions, who wrote a preface to it. It became the standard work on the subject. When in 1915 Seebohm Rowntree was asked by Lloyd George to organise the welfare section of the Ministry of Munitions the first person he asked to assist him was Dr Dorothea Proud. Her work was seen as shifting the focus of welfare from philanthropy to social economics. Hers was a pioneering study of work humanisation. This was academic and intellectual leadership which established that the work done by many women was valuable and could not to be dismissed as women's philanthropic activity. Dorothea Proud married Lieutenant Gordon Pavy in 1917, the year she was awarded a CBE for her work. With a DSc and a CBE, she was hardly a typical bride of the time. She was thirty-two years old, and had a well-established career and reputation before marriage.

This brief selection of early women graduates ignores countless others who contributed in similar ways in those fields and other fields, particularly law. Yet it underlines the point that higher education enabled women, as its proponents expected, to make a difference to the lives of women and children

and beyond. Furthermore they were often selected for committees, national and international, for their expertise. They were not alone. Countless other women who had not been to universities fought with their sisters on many fronts. Yet a degree gave early graduates a certain authority and a confidence, and also the discourse to take on the men whose aid they sought, whose institutions they sought to broach – and change.

A lifetime benefit were the networks women graduates formed, not only with members of their own sex. As a Melbourne law graduate of a later generation claimed: ‘Being at university put me into networks of people who subsequently became very influential ... so I think that’s something I take for granted ... 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.’¹³ Thus for many women graduates their education enhanced or, in some cases, contributed to a strong class position, one where influence could be achieved through a strong sense of self as an equal.

A generation earlier Ethel Osborne wrote to her husband of her desire to study medicine, ‘I find in a definite position that people give you more reverence (I think I see the reverence) and certainly your opinion is more likely to have more weight. The amateur is only the amateur, the dabbler.’¹⁴

How then shall we sum up the leadership of early women graduates – both individually and as a cohort? The concept of leadership has a history: it has changed over time with its vast body of literature developed only since the second half of the twentieth century. At the turn of the twentieth century it would not have occupied the thoughts of the women discussed here; in fact, it appears to be quite anachronistic. Did these women see themselves as leaders? I doubt it. Many were modest about their achievements and their post-university lives. They may have defined themselves as pioneers, as those who opened up a pathway for others to follow. Can we then see pioneering as a form of leadership? I believe so.

The individual women I’ve discussed were quite obviously leaders in their own right, establishing new roles, new institutions and leading the way for others. They were all involved in undertakings that challenged the status quo, which envisaged a new way forward, criteria which Amanda Sinclair sees as fulfilling one definition of leadership.¹⁵ They were ‘doing leadership’ although in a very historically specific sense. Women who entered new professions, who stepped into the public world of men, were leading by example. They were role models to the young women they taught, or worked with. They were shaping new possibilities and modelling those possibilities to young women and girls – and to the men around them. They were speaking the language of the institutions they engaged with. They gained both confidence and respect through their involvement in male-dominated institutions such as the university and the law. Universities were coded male

in the strongest sense: the rationality and empiricism lauded by the ‘research university’ built on a system of thought assumed to be the province of men while women were viewed as more emotional and intuitive. To enter the university, to partake of that knowledge, challenged the very basis of gender difference.

Many women graduates also modelled new ways of living, choosing a single life of economic independence, for example, or life with a female partner. They travelled widely to meet with others with similar interests. They formed support groups in like-minded organisations. Within married partnerships new patterns of companionate marriage emerged, more equal partnerships. Jessie Street’s and Ethel Osborne’s marriages both reveal the new pathways intelligent women were forging, creating space for their own professional lives as well as the care of children, negotiating that space with sometimes reluctant husbands.¹⁶

Conclusion

Modern research on leadership from the business-oriented McKinsey organisation emphasises the importance for ‘centered’ leaders of meaning in one’s work, of ‘finding your strengths and putting them to work in the service of an inspiring purpose’.¹⁷ There is no doubt that the women who struggled to find a place in universities and the professions in their earliest years had that sense of inspiring purpose to a highly developed degree. So too did the cohort of women teachers, determined to lead their young charges to consider new possibilities.

Leadership can be collective, as recent research is beginning to recognise.¹⁸ Arguably the cohort of early graduates demonstrated leadership in establishing new ways of working, being and living. They led the way to the recognition of women’s intelligence as equal to that of men. They were aware of their privileged position and of their responsibility for helping others. Their contribution can be seen as more than the sum of their individual efforts, although those individual efforts were frequently substantial. As a cohort they reshaped opportunities for women, establishing a historical record that underpins our efforts and still inspires today. They cemented the keystone in the arch as Zimmern had hoped.

¹ Alice Zimmern, *The Renaissance of Girls’ Education in England: A Record of Fifty Years’ Progress* (London: A.D. Innes and Company Limited, 1898), 103.

² Quoted in Marjorie Theobald, *Knowing Women: Origins of Women’s Education in Nineteenth-century Australia* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 68.

³ Alison Mackinnon, *The New Women: Adelaide's Early Women Graduates* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1986).

⁴ On Catherine Helen Spence see Susan Magarey with Barbara Wall, Mary Lyons and Maryan Beams (eds), *Ever Yours, C.H. Spence: An Autobiography, Diary and Some Correspondence* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2005); on Roma Mitchell see Susan Magarey and Kerrie Round, *Roma the First: A Biography of Dame Roma Mitchell* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2007); on Mary Lee see Helen Jones, *Nothing Seemed Impossible* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1985). For Helen Mayo see Helen Jones and also Alison Mackinnon, *The New Women*.

⁵ Ricardo Hausmann, Laura D. Tyson and Saadia Zahidi, *The Global Gender Gap Report* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2011)

⁶ Theobald, 55.

⁷ For a fuller account of Street's life see, Jessie Street, *Jessie Street: A Revised Autobiography*, ed. Lenore Coltheart (Sydney: Federation Press, 2004).

⁸ Alison Mackinnon, *Love and Freedom: Professional Women and the Reshaping of Personal Life* (Cambridge and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 107.

⁹ Diane Langmore, 'Ethel Osborne' in *200 Australian Women: A Redress Anthology*, ed. Heather Radi (Sydney: Women's Redress Press Inc., 1988), 133.

¹⁰ Ethel Osborne, *Industrial Hygiene as applied to Munition Workers* (London: Industrial Fatigue Research Board, Great Britain, 1921) and, with H.M. Vernon and B. Muscio, *Two Contributions to the Study of Accident Causation* (London: Industrial Fatigue Research Board, Great Britain, 1922).

¹¹ Langmore.

¹² E. Dorothea Proud, *Welfare Work: Employers' Experiments for Improving Working Conditions in Factories (with a foreword by David Lloyd-George)* (London, Bell and Sons, 1916).

¹³ Alison Mackinnon, *Women, Love and Learning: The Double Bind* (Bern: Peter Lang: 2010),

¹⁴ Mackinnon, *Love and Freedom*, 198.

¹⁵ Amanda Sinclair, 'Not Just 'Adding Women In': Women Re-making Leadership', in this collection, *Seizing the Initiative: Australian Women Leaders in Politics, Workplaces and Communities*, ed. Rosemary Francis, Pat Grimshaw and Ann Standish (Melbourne: eScholarship Research Centre, University of Melbourne, 2012), 15–34.

¹⁶ For Street see Mackinnon, *Love and Freedom*, chapter 6 and Osborne, chapter 7.

¹⁷ Joanna Barsh, Susie Cranston and Rebecca Craske, 'Centered Leadership: How Talented Women Thrive', *The McKinsey Quarterly* (2008): 38ff.

¹⁸ Sinclair, 17.