Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE4868

Mitchell, Una Hayston

(1900 - 1983)

Born	19000102, Perth Western Australia Australia
Died	19830109, Perth Western Australia Australia
Occupation	Principal, Teacher

Summary

Una Mitchell was Headmistress of Canberra Girls' Grammar between 1937 and 1947. She left Canberra to return to her home state to become Headmistress of St Hilda's Anglican School for Girls in Mosman Park in Perth. She retired in 1967 and was appointed Chairman of the Conference of Independent Girls' Schools of Australia. She was an inspiring Science teacher and highly respected principal, who had high educational and moral standards. She dedicated her life to ensuring the girls in her care were prepared for what she saw as a rapidly changing and modernizing world. She taught them to have 'a high regard for personal integrity', to be adaptable as well as to have 'enquiring minds and the spirit of adventure'.

Details

In 1909, at the age of nine years and eight months, Una Hayston Mitchell published a short story in the *Western Mail*. It was a cautionary tale of a ‘disobedient mouse’ whose behaviour cost the lives of his brother and sister. She also wrote engaging letters to ‘Aunt Mary’ at the same newspaper. She grew up in Murrin Murrin, a small mining settlement just north of Kalgoorlie, Her family had moved there so that Una could attend school. She explained to ‘Aunt Mary’ that earlier they had been nine miles from the nearest post office and she had been four years old before she saw another child. In 1911 her letters came from the Girls High School in Kalgoorlie. Mitchell was the daughter of mining engineer John Hayston Mitchell, a rather colourful and well-travelled character, whose achievements apparently included the invention of brakes and driving gear for bicycles, or so his patent application stated. Una was the daughter of his fourth marriage, to Florence Raddenberry Olney. The couple had moved to Western Australia from Queenstown following Hayston Mitchell’s divorce from his previous wife on the grounds of bigamy. Whether Una Mitchell was aware of the scandal in her parents’ past is unclear, but her later rigid respectability combined with determination to ensure the girls in her care were self-sufficient perhaps stemmed from this. She also remained unmarried herself. On a more positive note, she certainly inherited her father’s scientific bent.

Educated at Perth College, Mitchell graduated with a Bachelor of Science from the University of Western Australia. She taught Geography, Geology and Physics for twelve years at Presbyterian Girls’ College (now Seymour College) in Adelaide before becoming the Senior Resident Mistress and Physics and Chemistry teacher at St Catherine’s in Toorak in Melbourne. Arriving at Canberra Girls Grammar in April 1937, with ‘an established reputation as an educationalist’, according to the *Canberra Times*, Mitchell found a school with 107 pupils, 30 of whom were boarders. By the end of the year the roll had increased to 121 pupils, including 34 boarders. In 1943 she oversaw the refurbishment of a disused country schoolhouse, which was moved to the school site and extended to become a new Kindergarten building. Although primarily a Mathematics and Physics specialist, she taught Biology at Canberra Girls’ Grammar, as that was the subject that was required. According to a later history of the school, ‘the enthusiasm with which she taught this discipline was quickly communicated to her pupils’. She also encouraged her students in a variety of sporting and cultural activities welcoming a visit from Heather Gell, pioneering dance teacher, to the school in 1940.

The outbreak of WWII affected even the cocooned existence of Girls’ Grammar. There were first aid lessons, air raid drills and blackout practices. A shortage of domestic staff meant that pupils were required to assist in boarding house duties. Mitchell led by example, helping with cooking, peeling potatoes and even ironing boarders’ blouses. Once a week, senior students were invited to listen to the news on the wireless in her sitting room so that they were kept informed of overseas events. The girls were encouraged to participate in patriotic events and causes.

Mitchell’s educational philosophy developed during these years and she became convinced that ‘the tempo of world affairs has quickened so enormously in the last few years that children, now at school [must develop] an alertness of mind and resourcefulness which mere book learning alone can never give’.

Mitchell left Canberra to return to her home state as principal of St Hilda’s Anglican School for Girls in Mosman Park. She remained here for twenty years, during which time the school ‘experienced a surge of growth and development’. The publication of a book of school memories by the ‘Year of 1956’ provides a rare glimpse of how students perceived her. First impressions appear to have been formidable. ‘She could be terrifying ‘, wrote one former pupil. ‘I generally tried to avoid one on one encounters with Miss Mitchell because it usually meant I was in trouble,’ remembered another. She ‘had a habit of turning up when you least wanted her to’, recalled one girl, yet ‘her high standards of behaviour and admirable example [were] irresistible’.

Mitchell knew the names of all 600 pupils and was a versatile and committed teacher. She took over the geography class one year because there was no one else and taught it brilliantly. She was ‘well-educated and well-versed in the Christian faith’; the girls never forgot ‘morning assemblies under Miss Mitchell’s beady and morally splendid eye’. An ‘outstanding woman’, she genuinely cared for her students, who respected her and occasionally witnessed a softer side. One girl remembered that when she had appendicitis, ‘Miss Mitchell drove me in her little Morris across the lawn to Sick Bay where she sat on my bed and talked to me like a friend until the Doctor arrived’.

Interviewed upon her retirement from St Hilda’s Mitchell described her work as ‘exacting’. ‘There are plenty of headaches, but any worthwhile job has problems,’ she said, particularly in jobs dealing with people. Mitchell was committed to her work educating women for a future in which, she said ‘more and more women will continue with their jobs or professions after marriage, [with] the obvious problem… [of] how to reconcile the claims of home and children with the demands of a profession’.

In 1953 Una Mitchell was one of just over 11,000 Australians to receive a Coronation Medal. In 1980 the new wing of the boarding house at Canberra Girls’ Grammar was named in her honour. At St Hilda’s in Western Australia there is also a building named for her and the Una Mitchell Scholarship is awarded to a Year 12 Boarder for, appropriately, ‘depth, interests and strength of character’.

Published resources

Edited Book
Class of 1956, St Hilda's Church of England School for Girls, Mosman Park, Western Australia: A collection of stories and memorabilia, Moore, Jillian M., 2006

Resource Section
History of St Hilda's Anglican School for Girls,
http://www.sthildas.wa.edu.au/WELCOME/history.html

St Hilda's Anglican School Scholarships Information,
http://www.sthildas.wa.edu.au/Linked_Documents/ENROLMENTS/SCHOLARSHIPS/2012%20Scholarship%20Information.pdf

Tour of the Boarding House,
http://www.cggs.act.edu.au/pages/page214.asp

Site Exhibition
From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

National Library of Australia
[Biographical cuttings on Una Hayston Mitchell, headmistress, Canberra Church of England Girls' Grammar School, 1937-1947, containing one or more cuttings from newspapers or journals]

Author Details
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Digital resources



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