

**Girls and Schools:
A layering of past experience and present positioning.**

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With main and with might
In the thick of life's fight
With our torches alight

We will strive for the right
Neath the gold and the white
With brave hearts by toil unaffrighted

Aloft as of old see full proudly we hold
The white and the gold
Of the school that can mould with its motto oft told
Of knowledge and virtue united

The scene is 1958. In the picture a group of girls stands, posed by an invisible photographer - a man for of course in 1958 men were infinitely more likely to hold professional jobs than were women. It is immediately recognisable as a school photograph, in this case one of one particular class of an inner city Melbourne private girls' school whose official title reveals it to be a 'Ladies' College'. The girls

stand awkwardly in the prescribed pose; the front row sit with hands folded neatly on their serge covered laps, feet dutifully together in brown laced shoes; the rows behind stand, ordered in the school honoured fashion from shortest to tallest. They are dressed in a typical girls school uniform of the time, with shirts and ties underneath a blousy figure-disguising tunic of darker material. Their stance reflects the all pervading preoccupation with neatness, niceness and propriety; the military-style clothing is echoed in the words and tenor of the school song which they may have just sung. The photograph is black and white and the focus is not terribly clear. Despite this the viewer cannot escape the sense of awkwardness and self-consciousness that emanates from the group. Is it the unnatural pose? or the ranked closeness? are there invisible teachers calling

comments from behind the viewfinder? is it the unusual presence of a male - the photographer - who, although rendered temporarily invisible behind his camera equipment, is known to be inspecting the group and possibly each one very closely? But these are not women produced for the delectation of the male gaze! These are the daughters of the newly aspiring lower middle class taking up positions in the approved school formation. There is both a sexless anonymity in the uniformed gathering, and in some of their faces a defiance and a reluctance to be encoded thus. Some smile out of the picture offering an optimistic face towards an unknowable future. Others look mortified at being thus grouped and ranked and seem to wish they were elsewhere. The militaristic tone of the ranked rows of uniforms sits awkwardly with the sense of developing womanhood that the group also transmits. From a 90s perspective they stare out of the picture looking impossibly anachronistic - creatures of another time and place, by today's standards naive, repressed, dutiful and obliging. After all these young women have never seen Melrose Place or 90210, many have not watched television regularly at all. Some may have heard of the birth control pill being developed 'overseas' (that mystical unknowable place), all of them know that pregnancy is a terrible disgrace for the unwed that it is their responsibility not to fall pregnant, even though they are largely ignorant of ways to achieve this. There is no doubt that their schooling has equipped them in some ways - they have had a good deal of practice in verse speaking and choral work far beyond that of current young women. They have learned dancing and deportment and there were regular lessons in elocution. While most have had scant experience of maths and science, this does not strike anybody as a serious oversight - they do not see themselves as needing those subjects much less liking them. Nor do they see the school curriculum as an arena of choice - rather as a list of subjects that one has to do. Just as well because although this school is considered 'good' by popular acclaim, there is not a great range of options among its curriculum offerings. While most of their school subjects are clearly academic endeavours they have had some experience of politics insofar as these are the times of the DLP and so religion, a compulsory subject

at each year level, has become interspersed with regular anti-communist diatribes such that most girls are unable to distinguish religion from a particular narrow version of politics - it is a time of taking sides, them and us, and God is on ours, as long as we don't get pregnant.

You may have registered a certain degree of smugness shining out from some of the faces. This is because this group are survivors of a school system characterised by ruthless selection. In a time when most young people left school at 14, girls even more so than boys, the class in the picture are year 12 - 'matrics' then called - whose class size has diminished from 120 at year 9 (sub-intermediate) to 80 at year 10 (intermediate) to 40 in year 11(Leaving) and now just 12 in the final year of school. School attendance practices in Australia were soon to change dramatically; this group represents a trend much more typical of the early days of secondary education in this country. It must be added too that leaving after year 9 or 10 was not necessarily an indication of financial need - many private school students left at this stage (McCalman,1993). A significant difference in schooling treatments between those times and now concerns the fact that, up to and including the 50s, considerable numbers of students did not achieve the necessary marks to 'pass' into the higher years. McCalman noted a tendency for teachers to talk proudly about the numbers of students who had failed the Intermediate in her study of schooling in the 30s; the teachers took this position as indicating they were about the business of maintaining and upholding standards. Certainly in McCalman's work large numbers of students failed and left school around the middle years of high school. External examinations operated at years 10,11 and

12 and at each year level the satisfactory completion of a certain number of subjects was required before one could proceed to the next level. Nor can it be assumed that all those who had passed stayed on - the only certainty was that those who did proceed had achieved the required standard. So the young women in the class photo were remarkable not only in that they stood against the trend of girls leaving school earlier but also in that they had achieved sufficient marks to 'pass' in the previous two years. These were not simply the senior students, whey were also, in terms of the school, the academic elite.

Education in the fifties, especially in terms of the structure of the senior years of secondary school, was largely considered to be about sorting and selecting the more intelligent young people for professional university courses. Because the early leavers obtained ready employment, there was little stigma attached to not finishing high school, especially for girls. Australian education was going through a time of high functionalism, at least in popular understanding. Schooling at all levels was about sorting students in terms of intellectual ability - a streaming structure was widely

practised in schools, official in some and unofficial in others. If you were classed as of above average intelligence, you might be encouraged to complete year 12 and go to university. While intellectual level was generally seen as fixed, probably by genetics, there was still choice about staying on at school. Because of the range of employment options available to school leavers, it was accepted that some of the bright boys may not choose to proceed to university, and of course bright girls often did not - the concept of talent wastage was yet to hit Australian education. However the role of schools at the senior level was seen clearly as that of preparation for the matriculation, that is university entrance. While the expectations for girls were generally very different from those of their brothers, by and large girls' schooling - and especially girls' private schools - approximated the ideals and style of boys' schooling at the time. Although there were significantly fewer establishments for girls in the first half of the century and their resources were mostly inferior compared to boys' schools, the orientation was very much in line with the prestigious private boys' schools. This was pre-feminism. Despite the fact that there is no mistaking that the school was for girls, the teaching staff was all female and its very name, a ladies college, inscribed the sex of the incumbent students, there was no concession in its educational practice for positive initiatives for girls at school. As Johnson has noted

The girls' private schools of the 1950s, for instance, may have spoken to girls in terms of their being 'girls' through a range of practices - through instructions on deportment or the 'ladylike' way of wearing uniforms - but many of their educational policies and practices were preoccupied with the production of other capacities and ways of being in the world.

(Johnson, 1993, 9)

In terms of their academic curriculum the situation was undergendered - these schoolgirls had no awareness of their being precluded from understanding and identification with literary or historical heroes because they were girls. And so the young women in the picture took up as their own Hamlet's procrastinations and Lady MacBeth's hand wringing, they fought with Nelson and Bismarck and Queen Elizabeth I. They begged with Oliver Twist and loved Estella along with Pip - and none said they shouldn't or couldn't because of their sex. And if they had no qualified maths teachers and a poorly equipped science laboratory they saw such features as systems problems but not as a

result of their femaleness. Their situation was of course restricted to their membership of the middle class; as such it was not true of the education of their working class sisters in government schools, or even, to some extent, of the non academic girls within their own school. The girls who comprised the class of '58 were all studying a standard academic matriculation course; their academic status was reinforced by their survival in a rigorous selection system based on

external examination. At this time there were no non formal classes for students not destined for university. The small numbers in the group served to reinforce their status as the academic elite.

The coming changes.

All of this was to change shortly. The booming economy of the late 50s and 60s laid the basis for the rising retention rates in secondary education that began in the seventies- especially visible in the private schools around the country. The arrival of the much contested State Aid meant that many parents, especially those whose children were in Catholic schools, were more able to afford school fees. Parents who themselves had experienced the difficulty of finding work during the depression years were newly determined that their children should succeed - and education was seen as the key to professional work. The tendency of significant proportions of students to fail midway through high school and 'drop out' became virtually non-existent. Schools were granted permission to conduct their own internal examinations for the middle years of secondary school. The unwieldy yearly external examination structure was dropped in favour of only one external examination at the end of year 12 - a system that was not to change for some time. Curriculum in the senior school slowly expanded to encompass a range of interests beyond those of traditional tertiary entry, although in most schools the 'academic' subjects still held centre stage. Changes to do with female participation in secondary schooling were swift and dramatic, following revelations in the early seventies that Australian girls were significantly less likely to finish school than Australian boys (Roper, 1970; Martin, 1972). By the late seventies a higher proportion of young women completed secondary school than of young men - a trend that is with us still. Coincidentally a broadening of the general understanding and purpose of schooling and education has meant that, in recent years, the sorting and selecting function of education has given way to rethinking the senior school curriculum and its articulation into the more broadly configured tertiary system of today.

As always, the changes in schooling structures were indicative of major social changes in the broader society. Increasing migration through the 60s meant that the school population was to change rapidly and not simply in terms of increasing retention rates. The influx of migrants carried consequent implications for the availability and type of work for school leavers. The labour force soaked up the newcomers into unskilled jobs and the upwardly aspiring earlier Australians saw more reasons for their sons and daughters to acquire higher formal qualifications so that they could achieve professional status rather than simply get a job.

Population change also carried implications for the meaning of being Australian. Up until the sixties Australian citizenship had been developed in schools around stories of the ANZACS (Simpson and his

donkey being memorialised in schools around the country year after year on Anzac day) and pride in one's compatriots for their sporting ability. The changes in the fabric of this loosely woven nationalism consequent upon the protest movement stimulated by Australian involvement in Vietnam were of major proportions. The incipient

anti-Americanism, a legacy no doubt of Anglo-Celtic origins, fanned by the repeated questioning of the justice of involving ourselves in a war beyond our shores, combined with questions about the place of Australia in the dying days of the British Empire to constitute Australia and Australians differently from previous generations. A style of Australian nationalism began in the sixties around the protest movement; although predominantly Anglo-Celtic still, it demanded a recognition of the contribution of Australian endeavour in the newly emergent national culture. There was a boom in the local film industry, a demand for the incorporation of Australian literature in the curriculum, a revitalisation of some of the earlier traditions of bush poetry and painting. All of which raises questions about the ways in which the schooling of former generations fitted its graduates to take up places in the new and different cultural developments.

The sixties also saw the beginning of a transition from a society in which sectarianism was more easily recognisable in the large middle class groups than class distinctions to one in which the role of organised religion was to diminish markedly. The schoolyard slanging rhymes centring on religion, so familiar to students of the 40s and early 50s, were soon to virtually disappear. Most importantly for an examination of girls and schooling, was the fact that in the years following the fifties there was to be much attention to the position of women in Australian life and the way in which schooling processes were connected to the maintenance of that position (see e.g. Girls, School and Society, 1975). The impact of the second wave women's movement may have been felt most keenly on university campuses in recent decades, but the structural changes connected to women's increasing participation in paid employment had in the mid to late sixties and seventies begun to have far reaching implications for the education of Australian schoolgirls. In particular, the legislative changes whereby married women could continue in paid work, followed by equal pay legislation, had enormous impact on Australian women, who no longer had to choose between career and family. Before these changes, there is a sense in which the Australia of the fifties was a time of innocence, of certainties, of loyalties and naive nationalism - and the schools reflected these values.

The study

The present work was inspired by multiple sources, chief among which were Lesley Johnson's *The Modern Girl* and Janet McCalman's *Journeyings*. Whereas McCalman's book analyses the ways in which the particular sort

of schooling encountered by students in four private schools of the thirties led to their involvement in the establishment and consolidation of Melbourne's middle class, Johnson's work was set in the 50s and constituted an analysis of "the spaces made available in the 1950s and early 1960s for young women to grow up in" (McCalman, 1993; Johnson, 1993). Johnson proceeds to question the meanings of 'growing up' and the meanings of being female in terms of the schooling practices of the time. A central idea behind the present study was the contention that schooling practices are constitutive of sets of subjectivities that are embedded in larger social structures. Looking at a particular girls' school in the 1950s appeared to offer a likely ground to investigate the ways in which this process might have come about. Whereas Johnson's work was based on the discourses of the 1950s as evidenced in media of the time as well as educational theory and policy, McCalman's data grew from interviews with people about their schooling. The present work also adopts a memory work approach as it attempts to describe a particular style of schooling as experienced by women now in their fifties.

This paper developed from interviews with a group of women who finished secondary schooling just before the great changes noted in the earlier section. Their subsequent careers were shaped to varying degrees by their experience of schooling. The initial purpose of the study was to document the ways in which they were able to accommodate to the changes and to comment on their views on the changes in the role of schooling. A significant part of the analysis was taken up with looking at the ways in which contemporary educational discourse impacts upon ways of telling stories about school, as well as identifying themes within the accounts of schooling that sustain the argument that schooling practice works to shape the sorts of possibilities of both being in the world and thinking about the world. Thus schooling can be associated with the production and maintenance of ideologies which are constitutive of class and gender division.

A question of access - the group

The class of 58 was drawn from a broad range of geographical locations around suburban Melbourne - due largely to the school's central location. Girls travelled from the leafy established eastern suburbs of Camberwell and Surrey Hills, from northern suburbs such as Coburg and Thornbury, from the southern beaches and Yarraville and Williamstown in the west. For some, going to school meant a long train ride from the edges of the newer developments; for others it was a walk from the inner suburbs of Richmond or Abbotsford. The school had been operating in its central Melbourne location since 1902 and was relatively well known and well regarded. Few of the parents of the girls in the class of '58 had completed secondary education, none held a university degree. None of their mothers was in paid work. The fathers of the group were mainly self employed respectable white collar

workers - their occupations ranged from accountant, insurance salesman, trades person, shop keeper, bank manager and so on. Only one girl in the class of '58 had a mother who had attended the school, although several of the others had some connections with the school - mother's friends had gone there, an aunt had attended, a relative taught there etc. Three of the girls in the group had older sisters who had attended the school; two of the older sisters had matriculated and gone on to Melbourne University. One of these had gained academic distinction awards - her story was highly regarded by all. The school fees were set in the middle range for comparable schools - less than several schools but more than others. The girls in the class of '58 by and large considered themselves not wealthy, although all of them knew of people less well off.

Of the twelve girls who completed year twelve in 1958, all went on to tertiary education, ten to study at Melbourne University and two to what was then known as Teachers' College. While the majority enrolled in Arts and subsequently took up teaching positions, one did a BComm and also went into teaching. Thirty six years later eleven of the twelve in the original group were accessible for interview. Only one had dropped out of the social network begun during schooldays. Eight of the original group still live in Melbourne, two are in Sydney and one in Adelaide. While some are close friends there are others who see former classmates rarely if at all. Only two of the original group never married, three have subsequently divorced. Two of the group are child free. Only one is a grandmother although nine have had children, a situation which is precisely reflected in latest demographic trends in which young women are having babies at a much later age than did their mothers. Of those with children, family size ranges from one with five children, four with four, three with two children and one has an only child. In four cases there are still children in school. One woman has recently retired from full time work, all ten others are in

paid employment; the majority work full time. In many respects these women are typical of middle class Australian women of their age.

The purpose of the study

The eleven members of the class of 58 were contacted earlier this year and asked to participate in interviews about their recollections of their schooldays and to comment on their views on education generally. All were happy to participate. The study aimed to chart some of the ways in which these women were able to understand their school experience in terms of the significant social and cultural changes which were to occur in the period after their leaving school. There is a sense in which the schooling experienced by this group took place in an environment that was singularly inappropriate for the issues that were to confront them upon leaving school. The cultural revolution that took place in Australian universities in the 60s and subsequently

impacted on the broader community was centrally concerned with feminism and the second wave women's movement, nationalism and citizenship in an environment of highly vocal opposition to Australian participation in the Vietnam war and the changes in organised religion - and in particular Catholicism - which were to follow from Vatican II. All of these movements posed deep questions for the generation from which the target group is drawn. Questions to do with what it means to be Australian, what it means to be a woman and what it means to be Catholic. The focus group was well placed to be caught up in the challenges posed by these significant social movements. The group was also peculiarly ill prepared for these sorts of questions, having experienced a style of schooling in which questioning was actively discouraged, loyalty and tradition were praised without debate, and womanliness was irrevocably linked to chastity and responsibility. This was perhaps the end of an era in Australian education, in a form of unquestioning obedience and femininity, in a patriotic nationalism which celebrated war heroes - ours not to reason why - and in an overriding adherence to a religion which actively propounded the role of women as subservient and yet moral guardians of the sons and brothers, dutiful daughters to fathers, seeking only to please others.

Each participant was interviewed about her recollections of schooling, her later career choices and their relationship to schooling, her subsequent life choices, especially her choices and desires for her children's education. The interviews were then transcribed and checked with the participants. From these data the study aims to draw insights about the way in which one type of Australian girls' schooling operated within the total social formation at a particular time and to comment more generally on the connections between school and society.

The individual transcendent

As is perhaps inevitable when collecting material about recollections of schooldays, there was an abundance of accounts of particular events which had affected the individuals concerned, all different, all recalled with an amazing degree of clarity and not without passion. The interviews brought forth a wide variety of stories of girls coming to grief over particular incidents usually involving teachers and the authority structures rather than other girls - a feature interesting in that it is perhaps more indicative of how the story is retold and understood now than how it was felt at the time. Adults recalling situations characterised by their own lack of authority and positional power are inclined to nominate the authority of the time as centrally responsible. A consistent feature of these recollections was a preoccupation with justice and an insistence on personal integrity in

the face of the teacher's countervailing stance. The stories frequently concerned accounts of involvement in schoolgirl pranks -

smoking on the train, talking in the washroom, trying to contact boys in a neighbouring school, sabotaging lessons, climbing on the roof - with the informant representing herself as an innocent party who was not believed by the authority in place at the moment. The question of why these minor transgressions were considered so blatantly wrong was not asked, neither then nor now apparently - but they consistently represent behaviours that were considered unladylike. The dominant assumption being that these girls were to avoid engaging in such behaviours was beyond question.

The most interesting feature of these recollections was for me the way in which the women privileged a moral position built around individual conscience and integrity - values that the school officially purported to induct. In a curious and yet compelling reversal of the old dictum do as I say and not as I do, the class of '58 present themselves as the voices of conscience against an untrustworthy and suspicious teaching force. None of the informants wanted to appear as a precious goody-goody, and there were plenty of accounts of the reckless enjoyment to be had from flouting official rules, but most salient in their minds were the stories of being unjustly accused. The point here is not that the teachers were a particularly unjust group of women, but rather that the ready adoption of the modernist hero position of individual selfhood, one who strives for the right (as in the school song) against the forces of injustice, was a striking and consistent feature of these accounts. This feature, an insistent individual positioning, was to recur in a variety of guises in the interview material.

While most of the women readily characterised their experience of the schooling style as repressive, they also were quick to add by today's standards, or but not unduly so for the time, in may respects I think it was sort of progressive for its time, we did have a lot of freedom about our activities. It was as though they felt some resurgence of the school spirit that had been constantly urged on them during their schooldays and which had resulted in a stance that combined both critical insight and loyalty. All agreed that they would expect a different sort of education for the young women of today, and only one had looked for a similar but more contemporary school for her daughter.

Although ready to make critical comment, the women were reluctant to write off their schooldays as entirely negative, in a sense they maintained some investment in the self that had been produced through that experience of schooling. As Hollway has pointed out, people take up subject positions within a discourse, and in so doing actively select against different positionings in that discourse and other discourses, because of their investment in certain sorts of subjectivities and the consequent satisfaction they derive from such positioning. The satisfaction may well be in contradiction with other resultant feelings (Hollway, 1983,238). Thus the women in the present study placed themselves within a discourse of the rational educational critic, but their critique was also inflected with elements from an

earlier discourse of school loyalty. Even those whose comments were substantially negative, as in

I never felt they knew me when I was at school

or

At school I always was made to feel that I didn't have a brain ... took me years to believe that I actually could think and write

also commented on positive features such as their particular friends or a teacher they'd admired. The contradictions in their felt responses to their schooling tended to be resolved in terms of the rationalising comment but what else could you expect of schooling at the time?, a position which allowed them to recall their own keen sense of mistreatment without levelling blame at particular teachers or the school as a whole.

Few of the women remembered themselves as having clear personal goals at the end of their schooling. The two who did each reported I always knew I was going to be a teacher., thereby positioning themselves within one of the accepted modernist vocational discourses of the time, in which the individual is called to fulfil a particular role and the call is experienced on an individual personal basis. Most recalled themselves as largely ignorant of possibilities and life choices and felt the school could possibly have done more in that regard - although as they corrected themselves rather quickly, these areas were known to be beyond the range and expertise of the teachers at the time, the majority of whom were nuns whose knowledge of the wider world was not great. With the perspective of hindsight, most of the women felt their schooling was largely irrelevant in helping them to fulfil personal goals. Most believed they have achieved through their individual endeavour and through ongoing personal development; for two of the group goal fulfilment has taken them on personal journeys through a range of world religions in the search for moral guidance, for others it has been a case of ongoing study and pursuit of higher degrees in the cause of intellectual fulfilment. Only one had reached the stage of saying yes I wanted to do that (be a teacher) I did it; I wanted to have children, I've done that ... now it's a case of relax and enjoy myself. She considered her schooling entirely irrelevant to her subsequent career and has recently retired from full time work.

The group of women from the class of '58 have by and large carried out the task that many of them reported as their parents' wishes for them. They chose that school because they wanted me to have a good education and make something of myself - even though the 'something' was never explicit and most felt it meant to marry a professional man. All of the women have gained formal qualifications beyond the level reached by their parents; most of them felt this was explicitly expected of them,

the rest felt the expectation was implicit. They tend to report their academic achievements and career development as the result of individual striving rather than as reflecting the general social movements taking place in Australian society. Their accounts of their schooling and later development uniformly lack a class dimension - their analysis is constituted along the lines of personal choice and/or individual proclivity. The group split over the question of whether or not the school was seen as socially selective; half of them affirmed this aspect whereas the other half denied it hotly, usually in terms of a personal position of distaste for class elites. All however agreed that there were some schools that were more socially selective and others less so. Only one respondent said she 'always knew she was part of a minority group, being Catholic' but this feature was not related to schooling or the school's location. Once again the determined location of self-as-individual, which can be seen as directly flowing from the educational style of the time, precludes a vision of the school's function to serve the upwardly aspiring social group. Society was/is somehow 'out there' and the task for us as individuals is to devote ourselves to the interests of right and proper behaviour, rather than analyse our school's place within that social division. While all the respondents remembered knowing of others 'less fortunate', they also understood their own family situation as not-very-well-off, a perception which acted as a comfortable reassurance of deservingness

and operated as a blinkered middle vision within which the task is to do your best, to strive and to achieve - as urged by the daily singing of the school song : Brave hearts by toil unaffrighted! In this aspect the women of the class of '58 reflect a stance identified by McCalman in connection with an earlier generation of graduates from Melbourne private schools:

The traditional middle class frame of mind depended on a sense of personal righteousness - of believing oneself to be deserving, that one's life comforts and social position had been legitimately earned. (McCalman, 1993, 300)

Feminism - still a long revolution.

By and large the respondents both affirmed an individual belief in and commitment to the principle of gender equity and sought to distance themselves from what they understood to be the radical dissident voice of feminism. Again their position with regard to equality with men was virtually unilateral; similarly their conviction that the single sex nature of their schooling experience led them to this position. This claim - of the desirability of girls only schooling - to some degree conflicts with their critique of their schooling, and certainly is not borne out in the schooling choices made for their children. Many of their daughters have attended mixed schools. Once again the situation seems to indicate contradictory positionings within available

discourses. Certainly the question of personal school experience continues to be an influential factor in debates about school gender context. However in this analysis it is as though the sense of self that one recognises oneself to have developed in connection with the sort of schooling experienced requires an investment in elements of that schooling such as gender context for its safe continuance. How often have we heard a justification of some of the harsh and brutal elements of boys' private schooling in terms of 'it made a man of me'? It is as though to disengage from some central element of the schooling that structured one's early experience is dangerous in that it threatens the very viability of the vulnerable and contradictory self. In her argument for single sex schooling on the basis of her experience, one respondent commented we knew we could do anything that men did, we weren't bothered by being female and we knew our mums were wrong in thinking we had to be submissive to men. Another noted the degree of subservience shown by the teachers whenever a male, and particularly in the case of a male cleric, ventured on to school grounds - this she said made her sick at the time, and in recollection angry How were we supposed to feel we were worthwhile people when anything with a penis produced such a degree of fuss? she demanded angrily - in a voice from the 90s. But she too rejected the label feminist as too radical, too groupie, too card carrying.

In responding to questions about the school's stance in terms of a feminist agenda, the women all saw the question as inappropriate for the time. We were, they said, not constrained by the issue of being female in our schooling, rather we were encouraged to study and achieve.

The practices and policies of schools focusing on such notions (leadership .. love of learning) made available, albeit more straightforwardly to a privileged minority of young women than to the mass of the population, alternate forms of self-understanding - ways of constituting a self - to those which sought to form girls 'soaked in the immediate awareness of one's sex'.

(Johnson, 1993, 9)

At the same time the formal curriculum was barely adequate for a

humanities oriented further study, hopelessly inadequate in terms of the maths and science. Many of the teachers were remembered as under qualified and incompetent; some others were remembered as being particularly charismatic and highly effective. The curriculum was not broad ranging; the underlying assumptions regarding women's place were sometimes made explicit. One woman recalled an incident in the early years of high school in which she had received a low grade for Craft, a subject understood by the girls as dressmaking. The class teacher had responded by transferring the girl into Latin class with the comment You can learn all those things in a couple of months after you're married. In this incident it was clear that the non academic subjects

carried more gender associations than did the academic subjects - a recurring feature of discussions of curriculum of the time. And the class of '58 were by definition successful in the academic subjects and saw themselves as less developed in terms of femininity as compared to their less academic sisters who had left school in the earlier years.

More generally the women remember their schooling as operating in a world unto itself, wherein everybody was female and while one's femaleness was not elaborated upon, nor was it experienced as a constraint during the years of schooling. Once again the individual emphasis of much of the educational experience, and certainly of the group of matriculants in '58, caused them to evaluate issues of gender on an individual basis, an orientation that prevails:

I'd never want to join the bra-burners or go around waving placards, but I've always thought myself equally as good as a man in all the things I've done.

No I wouldn't call myself a feminist but I've always assumed equality with men.

I'm not a feminist but I believe all girls schooling is best for girls.

Our group was always special and the strong friendships have lasted but it's because we're the people we are, not cause we're women!

At times this subject occasioned a direct confrontation between an allegiance to individual merit and a commitment to feminism, as in

I've always believed that women are as good as men but I don't need to join a movement to prove it. Look at my daughter - she's achieved promotion in a male dominated profession and she's terrific and she didn't have to be a feminist to do it!

In other words allegiance to a group, whether it be based on class, gender or political party, was regarded as dangerous in that it had the potential to detract from the individual and hard earned basis of the achievement. There is a sense in which educational experience which focuses on individual merit as shown by rigorous selection actively works against students being able to adopt a group orientation or identity. For these women there was the problem too of managing a self image which downplayed their intellectual ability during a time when women were supposed to be beautiful rather than intelligent. To take up the role of woman had meant for some a downplaying of their status as high achievers academically. To take up the role of active feminist woman would threaten to destabilise the earlier construction of self as woman, albeit woman achiever, in a feminine mode. The far safer position offered by the discourse of individualism and personal fulfilment was embraced by the majority of respondents. And so, while

generally disavowing an alignment with feminism, they talked of the

ways in which their schooling had not prepared them for the difficulties they encountered in leading active busy women's lives.

Some of the experiences of the group are reminiscent of those described by De Beauvoir in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (evidence of the patriarchal structure transcending culture?) and can be seen as background to the liberal feminism that many of them espouse, although not naming it as such. Most of the group recalled a sense of destiny about becoming wives and mothers even during their schooldays - one remembered explicitly romantic images from the *Women's Weekly* of that year featuring impossibly glamorous housewives serving intimate dinners to equally impossibly handsome men; most were married within the next decade. For many of these women questions of feminism in the late sixties and early seventies were lost amid the busyness of dealing with the needs of young children. Most of them spent some time out of the paid workforce during this time. By the late seventies, with their children at school, many of them rejoined full time work and issues to do with career and terms and conditions of work took on much more significance. Perhaps as a consequence their views on woman's role are essentially pragmatic and couched securely within a liberal framework. Women's issues are important in ways that affect their daily living, issues for example of career possibilities and child care, rather than in terms of feminist theory and analysis.

Sexuality

In many respects the form of education experienced by the class of '58 was one in which issues of the body were denied. The separation of the mind and body had been achieved and in schooling at the time it was resolved in favour of the mind. That this should occur in the environment of a girls' school seems particularly inappropriate in the light of current feminist work. At school in the fifties, the respondents reported that menstruation was never discussed and the school's facilities in this regard were minimal. Most of the women mentioned a No Talking in the toilets! rule that they felt may have had some connection with the school's position about women's bodies. Most also remembered the location of a picture of Saint Maria Goretti, a young woman who had been stabbed to death in the cause of preserving her purity. Her picture was centrally placed in the toilet block, carrying its message through the obligatory silence of the place, a message signifying mystery and discomfort and ultimate sacrifice.

An area that many of the respondents nominated as one which was overlooked was sex education . Most of the class of '58 were desperately ignorant of anything beyond the basic facts of reproduction even in their senior year of school. Several recalled that the ones who had left school before year 12 were seen as vastly more

knowledgeable than their more academic sisters in this regard. This feature serves as another example of the way in which the school leavers were seen as gendered subjects by the asexual academic students. Apart from a special weekend session in which reproduction was taught by a priest with a series of large coloured diagrams and a long wooden pointer (as recalled by several informants) it appears that the school did not regard this aspect of education as part of its role. In this, as in many other features, it is typical of schools of the time and contrasts starkly with accepted practices in current education.

Female friendships

Several of the women recalled a time in the early years of secondary

school during which intense friendships formed - and broke - as part of the normal social development of young women. For many, the school was the only place where friends could get together due to the geographically disparate nature of the students' homes. What was remembered as well was a mystifying ban on the practice of 'special friends' hanging around together or walking arm-in-arm during recess and lunch hours. Again with the wisdom of hindsight this ban was interpreted by several respondents as indicating a fear that the special friends may develop a lesbian relationship - a possibility beyond the ken of any of the respondents at the time. What would now no doubt be interpreted as evidence of a certain sort of homophobia needs also to be cast within the context of the time. During the 50s there was much publicity given to a case in New Zealand in which two girls who were 'unnaturally close' had colluded in murdering the mother of one of the girls, so desperate was their need of one another and their fear of being parted. The Australian papers had given great attention to the case (Johnson, 1993, 103) suffused as it was with issues about criminal law, appropriate 'teenage' development and acceptable behaviour. The girls were reported as being 'wildly infatuated' with each other and their friendship was described as 'overly close' and 'unnatural'. The Crown Prosecutor described the crime as 'a cold, callously planned and premeditated murder, committed by two highly intelligent and dirty-minded little girls' (Sun-Herald, cited in Johnson, 1993, 103). Against this background of general disquiet about the behaviour of youth, concern about delinquency and control, it is perhaps less surprising that teachers kept a closer than usual attention to young women's friendships in girls' schools around this time. What is interesting is that this particular feature of their schooling experience was recalled by the majority of respondents as indicating another area in which their schooling had ill prepared them for later life. All forms of sexuality were regarded as distasteful, dirty and irregular and certainly not the stuff of proper school discussion or debate.

And yet for many of the group close attachments and lasting friendships were a feature of their accounts of their final years at school. There was a sense in which the school actively colluded with the production of such friendships - in some cases girls were billeted in one another's homes so as to enable their attendance at after hours classes, girls were often asked to account for one another if they were known to be friends, the special friend was expected to provide a cake for the whole class on her friend's birthday, and each year the girls participated in the annual ball in which they dressed in formal ball gowns and danced with each other in evident preparation for participation in a social life beyond school. Friendship was important and celebrated, so long as it was not 'overly close' - some respondents reported that they felt they had devalued their friendships with women in later life because of a sense of vague and disturbing concern that you must never get 'too close'.

A question of faith

There was a range of responses to questions about the religious education experienced by the group. While the minority who described their religious education as good, properly doctrinal and of lasting value, had continued to practise their religion in the accepted ways - attending church, sending their children to church schools, those who had opted out of the faith - or lapsed as they put it - were very dismissive of the school's preparation in this regard. For some, the

school's discouragement of questioning and challenge had meant an early and lasting disenchantment with organised religion; for others it was the remembrance of particular issues that had a lasting effect. An incident that was recalled by several interviewees had involved one of the group in her second to last year at school. When asking the religion teacher about the inconsistency of some of the church rules and citing a scriptural note urging charity and inclusivity, the questioner was told Even the devil can cite scripture to his purpose. The girl had left the classroom in a flood of tears, believing herself to have been maligned by the teacher. Other class members felt keenly for her; all of them registered the teacher's inability to answer the question. Given the degree to which individual mind was hailed as signifying greatness and the degree to which the class of '58 were supposedly the intelligentsia, it is perhaps not surprising that an approach to religion that was very much in terms of accepting truths as given and not to be debated was less than successful. Three of the group have maintained their commitment and consider themselves as officially within the church, although each affirmed an individual right to sort out moral questions on her own terms. Two of the women

who long ago left the religion in which they were raised reported having searched long and hard for a belief system with which they could comfortably identify. Both of these women felt that their schooling had left them with a desire to have something more than the material aspects of life but hadn't been able to offer a philosophy that suited them, and so they had undertaken their individual and decidedly different quests for spiritual fulfilment.

Much has been written of the Catholic girls' school orientation to sex and morality. Some of it is no doubt wildly exaggerated, most of it is funny and also rather sad. The topic has been canvassed by people as disparate as stand up comics and Germaine Greer: for many it is a source of hilarity, for some it is also an indication of the ways in which religion combined with patriarchy to control and subvert young women's understanding and enjoyment of living. In many of the interviews, issues to do with religion, morality and sexuality became intertwined. The women recalled questions of morality being writ large in the school's commitment to produce its particular version of god's police, largely to do with retaining one's virginity and that of all those with whom one came in contact. This issue was the only area in which their schooling had paid particular attention to them as women - and it was their womanly responsibility to control any sexual response evoked by their presence. There was of course no mention of their having any such responses of their own! Most of the respondents reported a feeling of overwhelming innocence regarding sexuality and outrage that their childish selves should have been thus burdened with overweening responsibility. The way in which proper behaviour, goodness, sexuality and the moral and religious order became enmeshed is evident in the following story:

It was in the sixth grade. There was a girl, Jean McAunty, who was a real know all and she was in our class. One day, for a joke, I'd found an empty exercise book and I made a title page The Facts of Life by Jean McAunty. Well ... when the teacher saw what I'd written, there was such a to do. I was immediately sent out of the room and not allowed back for days. My mother had to come up to the school and my older sister who was in the senior year argued that I wouldn't have known what I'd written. I remember thinking that I did know, I'd written that Jean knew everything about everything .. or thought she did. Of course I didn't know anything about what they thought .. I knew then it was something nasty though .. I felt dirty, horrible .. and stupid too.

It seems incredible in the sophisticated context of today's youth to recall times so innocent and young women so unprepared to develop into sexual adults. The elements of guilt and secrecy in the responses on this issue recur in stories of astounding simplicity and innocence, as in:

I was in real trouble in year 8. It was a Monday and in those days you couldn't get fresh bread for sandwiches on Monday morning and so we'd buy our lunches. Because our school had a better tuck than my brother's I'd get lunch for him too and he'd come across the road from his school to pick it up. This day I was waiting for him and, in the manner of children, yes, swinging on the gate while I waited - he came over with a couple of friends, picked up the lunch and off they went. Next thing I knew I was called for over the loudspeaker .. and being charged with swinging on the front gate trying to attract boys!

The speaker is one of the group who no longer conforms to the rules of the religion - but still remembers the shame of being accused of something dark and shocking and about which she did not understand. In both of these stories elements of sexuality interlink with forbidden knowledge and terrible moral responsibility; in each case the girl was left feeling ignorant, dirty and ashamed.

In these stories the discourses of religion and morality interlink around the topic of sexuality. In the schooling experience described, sexuality was not mobilised as a discourse by these young women. Rather it operated as a forbidden area, clouded in secrecy, mistrust and ignorance - even the word sex was little used. And yet the girls were positioned as moral agents within the discourses of religion and morality around the topic sexuality. They both knew their role and didn't know what it was about. In a curious reversal of the school motto it appeared that the two elements - knowledge and virtue - were incontrovertibly opposed, or even mutually exclusive.

Nationalism/ citizenship - before we were multicultural

Apart from the obligatory recitation of the oath every Monday morning the women could recall nothing in their schooling which led to an understanding of what it meant to be Australian. While for many a career in teaching provided one way of combining a commitment to social justice with an alignment with the traditional woman's nurturant role, none of them has become politically active. As a group they are non-joiners, exhibiting a powerful mistrust of labels and party political credentials. While some recall opposing the Vietnam war as a consequence of being mothers and therefore committed to peace and children, most have some distant memories of a time in which politics were marked by sectarian violence and choose to disengage. Again their account of their political position is couched in terms of making individual judgement based on abstract principles rather than group affiliation.

Three of the group were the daughters of migrants: one from an Italian family, one from Poland and the third from Bohemia via England. In two of these cases the families had been advised by the Cathedral to have their daughters attend this particular school as it was considered to deliver a good education. One of the girls involved in an interview 36

years later is bitter about what she considers to have been a less than competent education for her particular needs. She wished at the time to pursue a career in the sciences and as a result of inadequate teaching did not achieve the necessary marks in those areas to go on. (A similar case was reported by another interviewee, who had moved to the school from another state. She too had not been able to enter the

science based course of her choice and remains critical of the school and some of the teachers.) One of the respondents in this sub group of girls with a European background reported in interview an educational opinion that had been dearly held by her father and repeated to her and her sister as schoolgirls : You've got to get hold of all the education you can. They can take away what's in your pocket, but they can't take away what you've got in your head. Her memory of herself at school was one of trying to live up to this dictum, one that was clearly influenced by a history of European refugee status. Her diligent approach to her studies did not mark her in any way different from the rest of the class of '58, all of whom saw themselves as good students and keen to succeed. For the three from non English backgrounds it was a time of high assimilation and their time at school, at least in their recollections, was not marked in any way by their different backgrounds.

The past too is another country and one of the Australian born women remarked somewhat whimsically during an interview:

Do you know that my kids can't believe that we were ever world champions at tennis. Remember when Hoad and Rosewall were best in the world and we all felt sure Australia would win the Davis Cup year after year? .. well my kids can't believe it was ever like that.

This sense of national allegiance was not directly school produced but rather occasioned by the media of the time and the celebration of Australian victories in sport. And yet an Old Girl had married one of the world champion tennis players in the fifties and occasionally attended school functions - so there was some basis in the connection between the school and the larger arena of Australian male achievement.

Certainly the metaphor of combat was to some degree enshrined in certain school practices to do with nationalism such as the Empire Youth Sunday march, the weekly recitation of the oath of allegiance at school assembly, the routine singing of God save the Queen on public occasions such as Speech Night, in numerous hymns and of course the school song with its image of the girls as soldiers of virtue under the school banner. This image seems anachronistic now - but at the time it was accepted as part of the totality of school experience, a sort of automatic loyalty to country and to school. And it was probably significantly less so than in the comparable boys' schools with their compulsory cadet corps and their playing fields as training grounds for epic struggles. In fact as compared to McCalman's account of

Australian boys' private schooling in the twenties when lists celebrated past pupils who had laid down their lives for England and for school, in which their Australian nationality was completely elided, the situation of Australian girls' schooling in the fifties appears quite unexceptional (McCalman, 1993).

Interviewing and the multiple layers of data.

An unintended outcome of the present study was the way in which attention was directed in the analysis not so much at what was being said about past schooling, but at the way in which it was being said. At one level, it was perhaps inevitable that the informants brought their current educational position and insights to bear on their past experience. For instance, most of the women nominated sex education as an area that was entirely unaddressed by their schooling. It was an easy target and, as has been noted, one that has already been frequently canvassed in a variety of avenues of popular culture. The sort of schooling that was described by the respondents dealt with the disembodied individual as its focus - peculiarly appropriate to have been carried out by nuns in the atmosphere of the convent! Others

commented on preparation for leadership as not being addressed, a perception which reflects more on their current issues - most of them have senior positions in their workplaces - than any reasonable expectation of girls' schooling at the time. In their critique the respondents all position themselves as individual thinkers; no doubt their passage through selective examinations confirmed for them an intellectuality constructed on an individual basis. What I have tried to suggest in this paper is that it also precluded them from operating on a collective level apart from that organised around personally chosen friends.

By and large the group appeared to hold contradictory views about their schooling. While at one level there was a distinct and repeated indication of loyalty - to both the school and their own selves-that-were - this construction is peppered by a critical awareness of ways in which the school did not serve them well in terms of preparation for life. Their education had implied in its processes that being woman equated with being a moral guardian with respect to the maintenance of purity; being woman meant that it was likely they would marry and have children; but being woman was irrelevant in all mainstream academic learning. And so they were offered a curriculum that made no mention of women's involvement in history, of women's contribution to art and literature and mathematics, a curriculum in which male achievement was celebrated as though it was universal and beyond gender.

Many reported their going into teaching as an outcome of the school's lack of direction in careers - several of them have moved out of

teaching into other professional jobs and felt if they had been more aware of career possibilities they would have established themselves less painfully in their current positions. While there is evident truth in the claims that the school did not anticipate its graduates having fulfilling careers, I would argue that the reasons for their going into teaching were more complex. Teaching, as has long been noted, was widely considered 'the ideal job for a woman'. Frequently this position is asserted in terms of contact hours and holidays suiting parenting roles. The majority of the women in the study left school without any clear career goals. They also finished school without any understanding of the meaning of being women in the world. Teaching offered both an affirmation of their intellectual level as it required a university degree (which at the time only 5% of the population had), and, even more importantly for this group, it offered a way of taking up the position of woman as nurturant guide of the young and thus confirmed them as women in an unproblematic way. Little wonder then that feminism, which redirects attention at the 'woman question', should be regarded with considerable suspicion and even hostility.

Summary

Overall the interviews revealed an enduring sense of the individual being privileged in all the accounts - a feature which echoes current educational discourse in which the individual and the fulfilment of individual potential take pride of place. In the struggle to find themselves as individual women the respondents have tended to reject affiliation with larger groups, or even to see themselves as participants in a socially divided world. All of the women in the class of '58 achieved higher levels of formal education than their parents, all of them have held professional careers, all of them have a sense of being in the world that would have been unimaginable to the girls they were. While most of the group chose 'better' - i.e. more expensive and exclusive - schools for their children than the one they

had attended, the 'great leap forward' at least in terms of educational achievement that they experienced will not be part of their children's experience. Several of the adult children of the group have found jobs without needing to finish high school and without tertiary qualification; others are studying, some are on unemployment benefit. Most of the women can be seen to have been taken up by the opportunities for material advancement that were prevalent in Australian society of the time - they are significantly better off than their parents, in material terms as well as in terms of professional status. And yet there is a sense of the unremarkable people of whom McCalman wrote - theirs too is an average story about average lives (McCalman, 1994). They have participated in a society which has undergone revolutionary changes and yet in their accounting there is also a basis for understanding why change is slow and hard. Resistance

and conservatism are born out of achievement, especially when that achievement is recent, modest and hard won. And overall there is in their stories a sense of the pleasure of recall but also the impossibility of 'going back', even if such were desired. Much as they are critical of their schooling, much as they enjoyed it, it was for them and maybe for us all, schooling at the end of an era.

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