

3 The experience: peer culture or academics?

Oh you can't get a man with your brains.¹

The Melbourne History Department was my Paris.²

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

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

1 Smith College song c. 1950.

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

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

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

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

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

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

5 p. 85.

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

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

8 Heilbrun, *Writing a woman’s life*.

Quest and romance

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

With all sails unfurled

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The filthy weed

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

SMOKING:

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

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

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

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

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

16 7 February 1958.

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

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

Everyone was very idealistic

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

Starting a degree in commerce as a full-time student in 1945 Mary Goldsmith¹⁹ dropped to part-time study a year later, working in an office to support herself. She married in 1949, finishing her arts degree in another state in 1950. Mary loved her university days: it was an exciting period with many ex-servicemen on campus.

Mary: I liked it. It was just wonderful.

Q: What sort of clubs were you interested in?

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

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

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

19 Not her real name.

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

Q: It must have been a very lively time.

Mary: It was. Yes, it was good. It was terrific in fact.²⁰

Another said of her Melbourne University years:

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

Q: A good social life?

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

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

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

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

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

A: No, it didn't.²¹

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

21 Interview for 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

Unseemly times

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Q: You think that's a fifties courtship?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

24 June Factor, ‘June Factor’.

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

26 Ibid.

27 p. 2.

Outside the conventions?

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

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

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

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

29 p. 85.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 p. 87.

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

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

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

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

33 p. 91.

34 ch 10.

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

36 p. 47.

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

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

Lift off to get out

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[Sept/October, Paris 1953]

Dear Family:

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

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

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

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

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

After several weeks in Paris, Prentice travelled to Geneva.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Before leaving Europe Prentice travelled to Berlin:

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

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

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

Looking back now Prentice sees that time as deeply formative:

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

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

44 Fall 1954.

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

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

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

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

That attitude slowly changed:

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

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

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

45 Interview with Alison Prentice, 2004.

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

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

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

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

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

She revelled in Harvard’s intellectual life:

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

He has all the right prerequisites

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

47 Ibid.

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

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

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

Mr and Mrs Degree

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

48 Ibid.

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

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

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

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

The Radcliffe News noted that 1949 was the first year Harvard law was open to women, and that the first Harvard MD for women had been awarded in 1949.⁵³ While long-sought opportunities were opening up it seemed that few women heeded the call. For the class of 1951 the destinations noted were teaching, the combined nursing program, publishing, library work and management training. The most popular choices for the class of ’53 were English and social relations (a mix of clinical psychology and sociology), and only 13 per cent chose sciences. English and social relations were the choices of those contemplating early marriage.

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

50 Ibid.

51 Factor, ‘June Factor’, p. 135.

52 p. 136.

53 *The Radcliffe News*, 12 May 1950.

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

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

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

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

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

55 13 December 1957.

56 *Radcliffe News from the College*, 1961.

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

A subtle constriction at the edges

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

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

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

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

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

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

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

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

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

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

You didn't burn your bra then

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

61 p. 80.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The rebels

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

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

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

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

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

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

68 pp. 197–198.

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

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

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

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

70 p. 16.

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

72 p. 138.

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

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

Libraries or laboratories?

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

73 p. 144.

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

75 p. 69.

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

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

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

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

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

78 p. 7.

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

80 Mackenzie, *Women in Australia*.

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

For pleasure not for grades

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

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

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

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

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

81 Factor, ‘June Factor’, p. 120.

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

83 Factor, ‘June Factor’, p. 120.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

88 Journal of Alice Gorton Hart.

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

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

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

Sylvia Plath wrote joyously of her work:

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

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

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

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

89 Ibid.

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

91 p. 57.

92 Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

93 p. 61.

94 Ibid.

95 p. 63.

96 p. 68.

