

4 Life after college: a problematic realm

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

The pioneers in multiple roles came into their own.²

I had abdicated that responsibility [for plotting my own life] mindlessly following the Very Easy Simplicity Pattern for good girls, circa 1958.³

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yes ... I took that out in 1972 but I was doing that for a long while because I had two more children while I was doing that. I went back to university in 1959. I had to bring my degree up to an honours degree so I didn't bring my preliminary over until 1963.⁵

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

8 p. 162.

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

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

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

My Australian survey¹² indicates the importance of female influence: mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters and female teachers were all mentioned as main influences in the decision to attend university. 'She was a free spirit', one wrote of her mother, 'but she had a very forward thinking view in that she believed women should have the same

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What do the surveys tell us?

Sicherman studied three cohorts of highly educated American women, drawing on alumnae surveys for her material. Her groupings were those women who graduated from about 1875–1910, from 1910–1935 and from 1935–1955.¹⁴ Thus her last grouping is directly relevant here. She concluded that 'higher education for women has from the start been linked to enhanced vocational opportunity'.¹⁵ But higher education is a necessary rather than a sufficient condition in Sicherman's view. Economic transformations, politics and changes in the life course all shape the possible outcomes as do 'changes in consciousness and culture'.¹⁶ This is the cohort effect we have noted before. Dawson's work parallels Sicherman's research: she too included several cohorts in her Sydney study: the earliest graduates, the prewar generation and the postwar cohort. As we have seen (Chapter 2) sev-

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

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

15 p. 134.

16 p. 164.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

20 Yohalem, 'Columbia University graduate students'.

21 p. 141.

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

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

24 p. 156.

25 p. 141.

26 Yohalem *The careers of professional women*.

contemporary professional women.²⁷ The atypical patterns enabled them to maintain enduring work commitments.

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

A moratorium?

Another way of looking at this might be to see the period of the 1950s and early '60s as a moratorium, a rare opportunity for professional women, a period where they could marry early, possibly rear several children (large families, however, were more of a constructed image of the '50s than a reality), then return to careers. This pattern, while not as enduring or as well paid as the life courses of the lawyers, doctors and academics who maintained an ongoing work commitment, was nevertheless fulfilling and allowed for an equally satisfying family life.

Yohalem's work on high achievers highlights the notion that a graduate degree (or achievement beyond the basic degree level) was one way in which women could achieve 'exemption' from the norms of the time. Patricia Graham maintained that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a bachelor's degree put women outside the norms of femininity for the period. By the 1950s a bachelor's degree was not enough: 'College had begun to play the role that high school had in the lives of women at the turn of the century, for many simply a pleasant interlude on the way to growing up'.²⁹ In the 1950s a graduate (or higher) degree was necessary to place a woman 'outside the

27 p. 156.

28 Sicherman, 'College and careers', p. 162.

29 Graham, 'The cult of true womanhood', p. 403.

norms', providing a 'key to the professions'. It could also allow her to challenge those norms and expectations.

In Australia professional higher education in medicine or law also exempted women from 'the norms'. Those norms, reinforced by popular culture and tax policies, included female dependency and retreat from the public sphere. Dawson found that of the seventeen women in her Sydney group with law degrees not one had never been in paid employment. One Australian lawyer noted frankly of her degree:

Well it put me in an elite ... being a lawyer, having a law degree at that time ... So, as a woman, once you were a lawyer it added value to you and you didn't suffer some of the indignities that women, ordinary women, felt. You know, the guys would say, but you're different because you're a lawyer, and they wouldn't treat you as invisible as often as they would with other women. Or sometimes at a dinner party they'd listen to you or take you seriously ... it did give me more clout than I would have had otherwise.

This effect continued throughout her life:

Being at university put me into networks of people who subsequently became very influential, right, so I think it's something that I take more for granted. But my husband notices that wherever we go I know the chief justice or I know this one or that one or this politician, and more importantly they know me.³⁰

Another exemplified the desire for independence: Pam Cleland had travelled widely during her ten years of study in South Australia. She completed an arts degree, a diploma in social work, a new and emerging field, and, eventually, law. She was once told that the reason she had made money out of law was because she had studied social work and had been taught to interview people, 'to have a mirror in the waiting room because people like to see how they are looking ... and to handle them if they are crying'.³¹ Cleland had loved the new course in social work: 'Amy Wheaton, who was head of the place, was quite a scholar. She was into Margaret Mead and all the anthropologists.' But she was interested in practising law, in making money so she could be

30 Interview with law graduate, 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

31 Interview with Pam Cleland for 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

independent: 'Independence was very important to me. Because I wasn't very ambitious. So that saves a lot of kow-towing and doing things for the right reasons. Just did what I pleased.'³²

The medical women had the highest rate of continuous work – and of high earnings³³ – even when married to similarly high earning medical spouses and with children under five.³⁴ In Australia a case could be made for medical exceptionalism, so committed to their profession were the medical women. A medical career, whether full time or part time, could be combined with marriage and children and would not offend the sensibilities of the time. Nevertheless, many confronted discrimination in salaries and appointments in the public hospital system.

Writing of Australian women in 1962 Norman Mackenzie noted: 'the trend towards a combination of work and homemaking is advancing with increasing speed each year'.³⁵ Mackenzie found graduate women were less likely to be engaged solely in domestic duties than the national average: 'the graduate woman has a very much greater propensity to work after marriage and to use the training she has received'.³⁶ In Australia too graduate women were more likely to be in the workforce even through the period considered to be the most conservative of postwar decades. Forty-one per cent of Dawson's married graduate sample was in paid employment, double the percentage of all Australian married women.³⁷ How was it that a period that encompassed the strongest family ideology, as we have seen, the sharpening of distinctions between the sexes, an increased marriage rate and the strengthening of consumer culture,³⁸ could also see an increasing number of highly educated women in the workforce?

In what follows I tease out these paradoxes through the lens of graduate women's involvement in paid work after higher education. I

32 Ibid.

33 Dawson, *Graduate and married*, p. 165.

34 p. 128.

35 Mackenzie, *Women in Australia*, p. 95.

36 p. 130.

37 Dawson, *Graduate and married*, p. 143.

38 Cohen, *A consumers' republic*.

also consider the barriers they faced. The conflicts generated by those barriers led irrevocably to the challenging of the notions of women's 'role' which followed in the late 1960s and 1970s. The contradictions became too extreme. Something had to give.

Becoming visible: increasing numbers of women graduates?

Were there many women students on university and college campuses in Australia and the US in the 1950s and early 60s? And were those numbers increasing? Linda Eisenmann points out of the United States that 'At the start of the war, less than 10 percent of the age cohort had chosen college. By 1950, however, more than 14 percent attended, and a decade later, nearly 24 percent.'³⁹ In raw numbers, about 2.3 million attended college in 1950, but 3.6 million in 1960 and 5.2 million by 1964.'⁴⁰ How did women fare as a proportion of this number? Given the focus on returning servicemen, at least in the early 50s, it would appear that women were fewer than before. Many colleges cut back on female admissions to accommodate the male veterans.'⁴¹ Yet the absolute number of women in higher education actually rose throughout the postwar era, so that, by 1957, college attracted one in every five women between

39 National Center for Educational Statistics, *120 years of American education: a statistical portrait*, 1993, p. 76, cited in Linda Eisenmann, 'Reclaiming the "incidental students": higher education and women in the 1950s', Vice Presidential Address presented at the meeting of the American Education Research Association, Chicago, April 2003, p. 2.

40 US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Historical statistics of the United States: colonial times to 1970*, Kraus International Publications, White Plains, NY, 1989, p. 383, cited in Eisenmann, 'Reclaiming the "incidental students"', p. 4.

41 Cohen, *A consumers' republic*, p.140.

the ages of 18 and 21.⁴² In the United States the G.I. Bill was a federal educational entitlement offered to veterans – male and female – of World War II. From the midst of the G.I. Bill era in 1948 to 1963, women’s collegiate enrolments boomed from about 700,000 to nearly 1.7 million, Eisenmann claims. Even where their numbers increased, however, their proportions fell. Eisenmann argues that:

Examining women’s proportion of the collegiate enrollment demonstrates G.I. Bill effects dramatically. Here we see how the availability of veterans’ benefits dampened women’s participation in the several years immediately following the war. From a high of 44.6 percent of all students during the war, women dropped to only 28.8 percent in 1948. As the immediate effects of G.I. Bill funding eased, women slowly reclaimed a stronger share, moving only from under 30 percent of enrollments in 1948 and 1949 to 38.6 percent by 1965. In other words, two decades after the conclusion of the war, women had still not reached their earlier levels of participation; they returned to the wartime high of 40 percent only in 1967.⁴³

The result of the large influx of male students after the war had significant effects not only on the proportions of the sexes but on the perceptions of the typical student. Older mature men became an accepted part of the campus scene and women, where they were depicted at all, were often represented as wives of returning servicemen. But, as we heard from one Australian student of the time, the ex-servicemen made campus life more exciting. They rejected puerile pranks and brought a new seriousness to undergraduate life.

In Australia female university enrolment as a percentage of the total fell in the immediate postwar period, from 24.4 per cent in 1946 to 19.1 per cent in 1952, due to large numbers of returning servicemen taking university places. By the early 1960s women again accounted for nearly one quarter of all university enrolments, and the figure was

42 Mabel Newcomer, *A century of higher education for American women*, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1959, Table 2, p. 46.

43 Eisenmann, “Reclaiming the “incidental students””, p. 7, citing statistics from the National Center for Educational Statistics, *120 years of American education*.

rising. And if we consider the actual numbers of women studying at university in this period the change in women's options is evident.⁴⁴

There is an interesting difference between the US figures and those for Australia. Whereas women were 38.6 per cent of the US students enrolled in 1965 they were only 27 per cent of Australian students. Dawson too wrote in 1965 that American women take a higher proportion of university degrees than Australian women. The differences were particularly marked at the higher degree level. In her Sydney sample Dawson claimed that although women had taken out 22 per cent of all first degrees and 17 per cent of Masters degrees, they had only taken out 7 per cent of doctorates. This she compared to a general US number at the time where 'one out of 30 men and one out of 300 women (of a high ability group) actually earn a PhD'.⁴⁵

Overall American women were taking both more undergraduate degrees and more graduate degrees. There were, however, large differences within the systems, both the existence of a range of small liberal arts colleges in the US which were not present in Australia and the tendency of Australian universities at the time to view Masters degrees as a more common vocational end point. The pursuit of a PhD was not as common in the English system on which Australia modelled itself at the time. Indeed Australian universities awarded their first ever home-grown PhD in 1948. Why then were US figures higher? In part due to the long tradition of women's higher education in academies and small liberal arts colleges since the progressive era: the existence of women-only institutions that nurtured women's aspirations was another key aspect.

Women, then, were going to university in increasing numbers in Australia – they made up between one quarter and a third of the undergraduate student body – although, significantly, the numbers of women undertaking postgraduate degrees rose very slowly. It is odd then that women are so rarely seen as part of the university landscape

44 Alison Mackinnon and Penny Gregory, "'A study corner in the kitchen': Australian graduate women negotiate family, nation and work in the 1950s and early 1960s', *Australian Historical Studies*, 37(127), 2006, pp. 63–80.

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

of the time and where they are seen they are often categorized as an elite. Perhaps in the context of the smaller Australian population the 20,000 or so women students could be more easily overlooked. In his 1960 study of Adelaide University, for example, A.P. Rowe rarely mentioned female students.⁴⁶ In the US, part of that perception may come from the understanding that women did not reach the levels of participation in higher education that they had achieved earlier in the century. They appeared to be more likely to leave after a first degree for employment than in earlier periods, pulled into the growing post-war economy. They were also more likely to enter university as a stepping stone to a good marriage, as higher education (and thus a career) was no longer an alternative to marriage and family but a prelude to it. The widening of the student base of higher education in the 1950s, via scholarships for example, meant that graduates had different expectations: fewer came from a background that allowed them to 'indulge' in further education. In both Australia and the US women made up a high proportion of students in teachers training colleges, not usually included in the university statistics.

A similar invisibility attaches to the participation of women in the labour force in the period. Women were supposed to be at home in the suburbs, the centre of the family. But many were not, as both Mary Goldsmith's life and her small study demonstrated. More precisely many were both 'at home', the centre of the family, *and* in paid work, full time or part time. One of the recurring themes of the Australian and the American stories is the way in which women reconciled these two roles, always conscious of not undermining 'family'. The critical point here is that women were in the workforce but did not relinquish their role as the lynchpin of family life. In fact it was pressed on them even more in the 1950s, leading to an early awareness of women's 'double burden'. Would this discussion have been possible, I wonder, before World War II? Sylvia Plath, on a Fulbright scholarship to Cambridge, UK, wrote of combining her creative life with marriage and children, clearly realizing its challenges: 'I would like a life of

46 A.P. Rowe, *If the gown fits*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1960.

conflict, of balancing children, sonnets, love and dirty dishes; and banging, banging an affirmation of life out on pianos and ski slopes and in bed in bed in bed'.⁴⁷

Women in the labour force: a continuing upward trend

'The [US] postwar labor market showed a similar continuing upward trend in female participation', Eisenmann claimed. 'In fact, the participation of adult women in the U.S. labor market has increased each decade since 1900. Even after World War II, the numbers of working women grew from 13 million in 1940 to 16.5 million in 1950.'⁴⁸ Sicherman too noted that the absolute number of women in various professions continued to rise even as proportions fell.⁴⁹

How did graduate women fare in this climate? As early as 1952 'over half of [American] college-educated women between forty-five and sixty-four were in the labor force, compared with only 39 percent of high school graduates'.⁵⁰ So too in Australia women increasingly entered the labour market although not at the same rate as their American sisters. Whether responding to economic or intellectual aspirations or to national or family obligations, a rising proportion of all mothers in Australia either worked continuously or returned to the workforce once their children were in school. Whereas in 1947 less than 10 per cent of married women aged 15–64 worked outside the home, by the mid-1960s they accounted for almost half of the female labour force with nearly one third of married women employed in paid

47 Kukil, *The unabridged journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 225.

48 Eisenmann, 'Reclaiming the "incidental students"', p. 2, citing Claudia Goldin, *Understanding the gender gap: an economic history of American women*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1990, p. 10.

49 Sicherman, 'College and careers', p. 132. See also Frank Stricker, 'Cookbooks and lawbooks: the hidden history of career women in twentieth century America', *Journal of Social History*, 10, 1976, pp. 1–19.

50 Giele, 'Women's role change and adaptation', p. 38, citing US Department of Labor figures from 1969.

work.⁵¹ And, as Mackenzie pointed out, graduate women were more likely to be employed outside the home.

What did that participation in work mean to women in a time when the narrative of home and family was so strong?⁵² For both American and Australian women the growth of the professions was crucial, providing both impetus and jobs for the growing numbers of female students. As education systems expanded post-World War II the need for school teachers would shape the job patterns of the vast majority of women who graduated in arts and science.

The best of all possible worlds: a transitional generation?

It is this age group [women born during the Great Depression and the 1940s] of women that Bardwick (1980) predicted would be living in the best of all possible worlds in the 1980s.⁵³

Clearly women were entering colleges and universities in increasing numbers and were using that education in full-time and part-time employment in unprecedented ways. As we have seen, various authors declared the cohort of educated women born in the 1930s and 40s a transitional generation. They were pioneering the combination of marriage and paid work, albeit at differing stages of their life course. Bardwick went so far as to predict that they would be living in the best of all possible worlds by the 1980s. Could this really be so?

Drawing on a range of longitudinal studies Giele spelt out the nature of their innovation. Although this middle group (those born in the 1930s and 40s) grew up expecting to play traditional roles as home-

51 Katy Richmond, 'The workforce participation of married women in Australia' in Donald E. Edgar (ed.), *Social change in Australia*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1974, p. 269.

52 Mackinnon and Gregory, 'A study corner in the kitchen'.

53 Giele, 'Women's role change and adaptation', p. 50.

makers and volunteers, she argued, they actually established a new, multiple-role pattern – which combined marriage, motherhood, paid work and sometimes continuing education – while they were still in their middle to late thirties.⁵⁴ Mary Goldsmith's life presents a case in point. They were the first to show ever-higher employment rates from age twenty onwards, Giele claimed. They 'were pivotal in the shift towards multiple roles'.⁵⁵ 'When they were just twenty-nine or thirty years old', she continued, 'a remarkable number of them were combining motherhood with employment and graduate school'.⁵⁶ This combination clearly led them into both conflict with the reigning ideology of suburban motherhood and to consider new ways of being in the world. Some escaped that ideology by coming from immigrant families that subverted the ideology. An Australian lawyer noted that her family had supported her paid work:

again being middle Europeans, mothering wasn't a big thing for them, they were rather sophisticated Viennese. In Vienna the middle classes had nannies and help in the house and all that sort of thing so they couldn't see why I couldn't just get someone to look after the children and go back to work.⁵⁷

But that view was unusual.

Being transitional

I was one of that cohort, on my way to becoming a high school teacher, happy to fit my working life around that of my husband, a young medical consultant in training. After my arts degree I studied for a Diploma in Education like so many of my peers. I taught in a country high school for two years then married at the age of 23. In common with others of the Pill generation I postponed children, teaching for another two years. After our first child was born we moved to

54 p. 42.

55 p. 43.

56 p. 45.

57 Interview with law graduate for 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

another city for my husband's graduate work. There I started working towards a Master's degree as much for company and stimulation in a new environment as for any career motivation. A second son followed, then travel to pursue my husband's career in the UK and, eventually, the US where son number three was born. I began to crave stimulating work but being without the requisite US visa I opted for voluntary work instead. Return to Australia saw me back at work on my Master's degree with, by that stage, a keen motivation, fanned by the emerging literature of the women's movement. I was thirty-two, a little older than Giele's exemplar, but every bit as enthusiastic to live life differently. The offer of an academic position (at the lowest level) was the stimulus I needed to become one of the transitionals. I was the mother of three children, wife of an increasingly successful professional husband, graduate student (part-time) and university teacher (full-time) in an education faculty. How much of this was serendipity, how much due to the times? Can I take credit for any achievement or was I in the right place at the right time? As I read about this period I recognize myself.

Yohalem described highly qualified women renewing their ties to work through former employees and colleagues. My offer came from a professor who taught one of my master's courses. University numbers were expanding and faculty were needed, particularly in 'female' professions such as education. I combined both the patterns of those who did not have continuous employment careers (I spent seven years out of the workforce) and those who did, eventually building a strong professional career. Perhaps this was only possible in Australia at that time when an academic position could be won without a completed doctoral degree. That degree had to be finished later, part time, an exhausting challenge with a full-time career and three children. Giele named Mary Catherine Bateson's philosophy, expressed in the title of her book *Composing a life* as 'the leading ideology of her cohort'.⁵⁸ Was I composing a life? It felt like barely managed chaos at the time.

58 Giele, 'Women's role change and adaptation', p. 47; Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a life*, Atlantic Monthly Press, New York, 1989.

The challenge for Bateson and for others was to integrate family and career, to achieve in both 'without having to sacrifice one for the other'.⁵⁹ I ask myself: Did I achieve that balance? Perhaps I was living in 'the best of all possible worlds', living at a time when opportunities were opening up, while there was still time to pursue further education and garner experience. The circumstances that drew many young professional women into the buoyant labour market in the 1970s and early '80s have changed irrevocably. Many doors have closed. It is difficult for young women to gain the experience they need to break into the job market and to combine that with family life. The transition my generation lived out has not yet resulted in the new world we dreamed of.

Composing a life: family and individual in transition

The first generation of women who graduated from universities and colleges in the English-speaking world frequently had to decide between marriage and career, between love and freedom.⁶⁰ A brave few managed to combine both, usually because of a very secure economic position, a shared commitment to a profession such as medicine, or a rare case of a supremely brave and often iconoclastic individual with strong financial support. That tension has been of continuing interest to psychologists who use the language of 'role' conflict rather than terms such as love and freedom. They ask 'in what way and under what circumstances is sex role ideology associated with choice and planned action?'⁶¹ This has frequently translated into discussions of psychologically inflected 'role conflict' as we have seen (Chapter 1). Can women become the agents of their own destiny in the light of predominant sex role understandings?

59 Giele, 'Women's role change and adaptation', p. 47.

60 Mackinnon, *Love and freedom*.

61 Jean Lipman-Blumen and Ann R. Tickamyer, 'Sex roles in transition: a ten year perspective', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 1, 1975, 297–337.

Such a question took on a renewed urgency in the 1950s and early 60s when sex 'roles' were both more sharply defined and yet facing challenge. Giele identified a similar subtheme of autonomy and dependency in her overview of several studies of women graduates. The pervasiveness of understandings of women's role directly prevented some women from taking paid work, even in roles for which they were seen to be suited. One woman related the story of an influential kindergarten advisor:

Now her policy was that in the 50s she would not employ any teacher or pre-school assistant who had a child under the age of five; that was her policy and you could call that discrimination now ... but it was her firm belief that children under five needed a parent at home so that was the 50s.⁶²

Those who draw on life course studies of women graduates throughout the twentieth century claim that a caring, family-oriented set of values has diminished, giving way to a more individualistic focus on achievement and equality.⁶³ The cohort of UCLA graduates of the late '50s was oriented towards finding a balance between the agentic and communal aspects of life and felt at the age of forty-six that they had achieved it.⁶⁴ Giele believed the transitional women of the 1930s and 1940s (that is, born in those decades) were 'clearest in their emphasis on a balanced life'. 'The pioneers in multiple roles', Giele declared, 'came into their own'.⁶⁵ But that balance came at a cost, usually to the woman, who kept her career aspirations in check.

Are 'women who have juggled multiple roles ... psychically and psychologically healthier at midlife' as Hulbert asked?⁶⁶ She maintained that they were. Perhaps like one Australian graduate they 'just got on with it'. Another summed it up: 'I used to get terribly tired and sometimes quite frustrated because I'd be tired and there'd be a lot I

62 Interview for 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

63 See for instance Ulrich Beck, *Risk society: towards a new modernity*, Sage, London, 1992.

64 Giele, 'Women's role change and adaptation', p. 53.

65 p. 54.

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

wanted to do and, I mean, that's life isn't it really?'⁶⁷ The Radcliffe class of '64 confirmed Hulbert's view. The authors claimed that their findings supported many other studies showing that women with multiple role involvements (family, career) 'may actually be better off at mid life'.⁶⁸ The desired balance was certainly not easy and women struggled to attain it. Nor did everyone have the courage, or perhaps the strong constitution, to break free of expected patterns.

Mary Goldsmith reflected on her choices:

Q: I think many people who have had a higher education did go somewhat against the grain.

Mary: Well I think I did as a matter of fact. I remember we had lunch with a couple of school friends of mine the other day and they were saying how they couldn't do this and they couldn't do that. And they couldn't leave home and they couldn't do the other. And I finally said, but I did that. And they said, but that was you, though. But they couldn't. Although they wanted to, neither of them could.

Jill Ker realized she was different when she chose her studies over the demands of a lover:

Then, when the last possible moment came for preparation for examinations I simply disappeared to study and refused all invitations. This incomprehensible conduct produced many storms which left me feeling guilty about studying, a new and startling experience ... When presented with the conflict, there was no question of which side I would finally come down. Studying history was more important than the strongest infatuation. I knew this was not the way women were supposed to be, but I couldn't change my deepest motivations.⁶⁹

Some did live in the best of all possible worlds, thankful to have had a career at all rather than concerned whether that career was equal to that of a man. After all, their undergraduate education had not explic-

67 Interview for 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

68 Abigail J. Stewart and Elizabeth A. Vandewater, 'The Radcliffe class of 1964: career and family social clock projects in a transitional cohort' in Hulbert and Schuster, *Women's lives through time*, p. 256.

69 Conway, *The road from Coorain*, p. 181.

itly prepared them for a career: it was a ‘climate of unexpectation’.⁷⁰ The lack of career counselling available to women at college or university in the 1950s and early 60s was legendary and is a frequent theme in interviews and memoirs.

‘I didn’t know how to go about finding out, really, what possibilities there were with art courses. We had no career nights of any sort back then’. Worse, any advice given often served to narrow women’s options:

I wanted to do science because engineering was not considered the thing for girls. But the school and the university said girls doing science should do biology. And I said I don’t like biology. And they said, well the average life of a female scientist is only 3.9 years. You’ve got to do biology.⁷¹

‘I remember being asked to raise hands in class about what we wanted to do’, another reflected, ‘and I remember saying physiotherapy because I thought it was a pretty word’.⁷²

Out of sync with the social clock

What did it mean to be a young adult woman, highly educated at a private women’s college in the United States, then reaching adulthood in the turbulent years of the 1960s? Ravenna Helson’s review of Mills College graduates of the classes of 1958 and 1960 provides another part of the story. The longitudinal study was originally ‘an investigation of creativity, leadership and outlook towards the future in “modern” young women’.⁷³ Helson noted that, although the interest in creativity continues, the Mills study since 1980 has focused on the individual in society over time and on women’s adult development.⁷⁴ It is

70 Linda Eisenmann, ‘Weathering “a climate of unexpectation”’: gender equity and the Radcliffe Institute, 1960–1995’, *Academe*, 81(4), 1995, pp. 21–25.

71 Interview for ‘Graduating in the fifties’ project.

72 Interview for ‘Graduating in the fifties’ project.

73 Helson, ‘The Mills classes of 1958 and 1960’, p. 190.

74 Ibid.

centrally concerned with the understanding of personality, the attribute par excellence of the time.

This multifaceted investigation, which surveyed the classes of 1958 and 1960 in their mid-twenties, their early forties, and their early fifties, opens a window into the changes in educated women's lives over the life span. It offers the possibility of linking their individual lives to wider social change. Some of Helson's conclusions are startling, particularly the discrepancy between expectation and actualities, supporting the notion of this group as a transitional generation. For instance, as seniors in college the Mills women said that they wanted an average of 3.5 children, most commonly four. Yet by their early forties they had an average of 1.7 children and one quarter had none at all.⁷⁵ This finding parallels my Australian survey, where 64 per cent of respondents envisaged an ideal number of children, up to 50 per cent nominating four children as the ideal. In fact the actual completed family size diverged for half the participants: the average completed family size of the sample was 2.7.

Helson used the concept of the social clock as a tool to measure change. The social clock was described to the women as 'a set of socially approved age norms superimposed on the biological clock (chronological age)'.⁷⁶ Here we can see a link with Graham's notion, discussed earlier, of an exemption from the 'norms' conferred by varying levels of education. Helson asked her respondents to consider how their lives had diverged from the social clock. Over three quarters of the women in the survey felt that their lives had deviated in significant respects.

Here again is a transitional generation, a pivotal generation in Sicherman's terms. Some (22 per cent) cited not getting married or having children as a deviation from the social clock, another 22 per cent spoke of marrying late or having children late as a deviation, 10 per cent listed divorce and others spoke of taking up alternative lifestyles or returning to study in their thirties as a break with the social

75 p. 197.

76 p. 205. See also Stewart and Vandewater, 'The Radcliffe class of 1964' on the usefulness of 'the social clock'.

clock. In fact less than a quarter (22 per cent) felt that their lives had *not* differed from expectations. Were they perhaps setting a new social clock for later generations to follow? Helson sees these data as evidence that the classes of 1958 and 1960 'have lived lives of considerable challenge in terms of adjustment'.⁷⁷ The reasons for this challenge are the subject of another chapter but it is significant that the respondents themselves mentioned feminism or the women's movement as social influences most often, with civil rights and racial integration the next most important.⁷⁸

The old image is competing with the new

There was a particular rupture for the Mills women around age thirty: an 'age thirty transition', Helson called it. It came at a time when most of the women were involved in marriage, childbearing or work. Many women reported feelings of depression, resentment and incompetence. Helson interpreted this finding to indicate that 'many members of the sample were caught between two life structures – that they had rejected the old and not yet envisioned or solidified the new'.⁷⁹ Dawson used similar terms in her study of Sydney graduates: 'the old image of women is competing with the new, old values with new values ... they have no script to follow in working out a life pattern'.⁸⁰ Furthermore that time came for the Mills class of 1958 and 1960 in the late '60s, when motherhood was not as highly valued as before and the women's movement was leading to a renegotiation of relations between men and women, husbands and wives.

Was this 'age thirty transition' peculiar to the graduates of Mills College, a private college where young women were socialized to become confident, competent and independent young women? Or was it common to the cohort of late 1950s graduates or even early and mid

77 p. 205.

78 p. 206.

79 p. 201.

80 Dawson, *Graduate and married*, p. 221.

1950s graduates? It appears to have been far more common particularly amongst highly educated young women in many parts of the world who had experienced a sense of competence at university or at work and were then confronted by the frustrations – and joys – of young motherhood. An Australian interview suggests that the age thirty transition was not specific to the US and Mills College:

I got very bored being a wife so I then went back to work in Sydney with a public solicitor and then I got pregnant, and I had three children in three and a half years ... and trying to practice in between, not very successfully, but sort of trying to get away from that sort of terribly bored [and] trapped feeling. And I was getting unhappier and unhappier, putting on more and more weight too.⁸¹

Such unhappiness and resentment may also have resulted from the high level of psychological awareness of a generation of young women schooled in psychology, child development and the need for adjustment, whose expectations of themselves were much higher than that of a previous generation. They were *supposed* to feel fulfilled in their mothering role, in their sacrifice of their ambitions to those of their husbands; they were meant to accept the notion of a ‘reflected identity’⁸² but the reality was often a bitter alternative. A sense of that reflected identity comes through the recollections of Alison Prentice on her marriage at the grand old age of 25:

I did have a scholarly, intellectual bent and as soon as I met somebody like Jim who was connected with the university that was it. I married a university professor to get into the university and I had no idea consciously that that was what I was doing, but everyone else who came along got discarded or rejected or it didn’t work out.⁸³

Another major discrepancy between expectation and reality occurred in relation to workforce participation. Only 20 per cent of the Mills seniors expected ‘to work always, or unless work interferes with fam-

81 Interview for ‘Graduating in the fifties’ project.

82 Helson, ‘The Mills classes of 1958 and 1960’, p. 202.

83 Interview with Alison Prentice, ‘Graduating in the fifties’ project.

ily'.⁸⁴ Helson found, however, that 'one third of the sample was heavily involved in the world of work at age thirty-two, almost two thirds were heavily involved at age forty-two and in 1981 almost two thirds of the sample – now in their forties – felt a bit defensive if they were not in the labor force'.⁸⁵ Similarly only 5 per cent of Dawson's Sydney women graduates had expected to combine a particular degree with marriage. However she found that in fact 41 per cent were combining career with marriage, a testament to both the power of their education and changing social norms.⁸⁶ For this generation then the expected traditional life of housewife and mother, with perhaps a strong voluntary role in the community, had given way to the multiple roles of Giele's study, and the issues that came with it.

Students from another elite women's college at a similar period (Vassar classes of 1957 and 1958) were divided into two groups on the basis of faculty nominating them, or not nominating them, as 'ideal students'.⁸⁷ The criteria listed for the nominated ideal students are as much a window into the ways in which male and female students were viewed, of the psychological categories enlisted in the late 1950s to assess personality, as of the students themselves. Those nominated by faculty as ideal were found to have

a good credit ratio, were high on the admissions criteria but were not necessarily top candidates, had high social maturity, showed a moderate amount of impulse expression, were low on measures of repression and suppression, achieved high development status as seniors, were low on conformity into the student peer culture, had adequate self confidence, were *mildly dominating, tended towards masculine interests*, and were low on authoritarian tendencies both personally and on sociopolitical issues.⁸⁸

The tendency to masculine interests is intriguing. What did this mean? Were these students more 'achievement oriented', less inter-

84 Helson, 'The Mills classes of 1958 and 1960', p. 194.

85 p. 203.

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

87 Brown and Pacini, 'The Vassar classes of 1957 and 1958', p. 163.

88 p. 168, emphasis added.

ested in stereotypical feminine pursuits? The description of the Vassar College Attitude Inventory (VCAI) scales elaborates: ‘high scorers endorse interests and attitudes characteristic of men in our culture: low scorers show conventionally feminine characteristics such as passivity and acquiescence’.⁸⁹ Aha! Presumably the tendency to masculine interests was manifest in more active, independent behaviour.

On self-report this group could also be characterized as having an ‘acceptance of the theoretical and the abstract as worthwhile’.⁹⁰ Could that be part of the tendency towards masculinity? Given that higher education had been initially established for men, was a perceived tendency to the abstract, to masculinity, as well as being ‘mildly dominating’ an advantage, even in a college established for women? Years later one Vassar ‘nominee’ seems to endorse that view, summing up the causes of her changing political opinion as: ‘achievement of genuine psychological independence, an ability to think analytically and critically, nurtured by majoring in philosophy at Vassar’.⁹¹ Did one necessarily become an achiever at the expense of one’s femininity?

An Australian physicist, whose mother had been a maths teacher, worked in the area of rocket science. She felt that in the fifties science created good career paths: there was a great shortage of physicists and mathematicians. After her PhD she won a Royal Society of the Exhibition of 1851 scholarship for science research to University College London. There she was the only professional woman in her department. After marriage and two children, and a return to Australia, she began working part time as a university lecturer, moving to full-time work when the children reached school age. She clearly had a strong ‘acceptance of the theoretical and the abstract as worthwhile’. And she was not prey to the ideology of the perfect female: ‘nearly all my friends were boys ... most of my friends were male’. At the same time she felt no threat to her femininity, nor any need to engage in the

89 p. 164.

90 p. 168.

91 p. 182.

women's movement when it arrived: 'my mother was a feminist. It was something I grew up with, yes'.⁹² Some refused to fit the categories.

The two Vassar groups, those nominated as ideal students and those not nominated (what a fate!) were further subdivided according to high academic ranking or lower rank. Follow-up of the two groups over several decades (the last iteration of the study took place in 1991) revealed some interesting differences. The 'nominated' group had shown consistent dedication to their careers whereas the 'non-nominated' group were constant in their attention to relationships, and were more traditional and family-oriented.⁹³ Curiously the non-nominated group were deemed happier in later life, and had a stronger sense of well-being, of acceptance of self, than the nominated group.

All the Vassar women had expected to follow the normative pattern of a stable marriage, not surprising for their time, and the vast majority did marry. For those who did not (the single, the multiply married and the divorced) the single and divorced women were more likely than the married or remarried women to have had continuous full-time careers and to prioritize their careers highly.⁹⁴

At ages fifty-five and six the Vassar women 'were leading happy productive lives, busy in careers or voluntary work'.⁹⁵ Many had chalked up considerable achievements. Significantly there was little or no evidence of menopausal problems, midlife crisis or 'empty nest' distress. In general: 'they reported feelings of high morale, self-esteem and well being'.⁹⁶ Like the Mills College women they saw as the major personal influences on their lives the women's movement, and the civil rights and environmental movements.

Speaking of their subjects Brown and Pacini used the now familiar words: 'They seemed to get the best of both worlds'.⁹⁷ Using another image typical of this cohort the authors described the Vassar

92 Interview for 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

93 Brown and Pacini, 'The Vassar classes of 1957 and 1958', p. 184.

94 p. 185.

95 p. 186.

96 Ibid.

97 p. 187.

classes of 1957 and '58 as 'bridging the generations, finding themselves in between their children and their own parents'.⁹⁸ It was clear to many who lived through it that this generation represented a particular turning point, some naming themselves as 'the swing bridge generation' linking the traditionalism of parents with the more liberated generation that followed.

The Wellesley record book that celebrated the fortieth reunion of the graduating class of 1960 claimed a special reason for the importance its classes of '59 and '60. The class of '59 sponsored an extensive survey, 'which found that '59 – hence '60 as well – is the pivotal point of a shift between those whose post-graduation careers put marriage and family first (at least chronologically) and those who started to establish a professional career prior to starting marriage and family'.⁹⁹ The Wellesley investigators, recognizing the multiple possibilities for their alumnae, asked them whether they had chosen to move *with* or *against* the grain of the time, a very telling metaphor around which alumnae grouped their stories. Here too was recognition of the transitional generation.

But was it the best of all possible worlds and did such terms apply only to those who attended the elite women's colleges of the United States, who tended to study their students and alumnae extensively? There are several sources for comparison with Australian women as we have seen, both through the many surveys of the period¹⁰⁰ and through my own extensive research with graduates of the universities of Melbourne and Adelaide. These large public institutions were co-educational and located in major cities, unlike many of the elite women's colleges of the US. A few women (20 per cent in Dawson's

98 Ibid.

99 Judy Huggins Balfe, 'Introduction' in Wellesley 1960 40th Reunion, *Record Book*, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA, 2000. I am grateful to Judy Grace for bringing this issue to my attention.

100 E.g. Dawson, *Graduate and married*; Meg Rorke with Fred Schonnell and I.G. Meddleton, *The vocational contribution of women graduates of the University of Queensland*, Research Publication no. 6, Faculty of Education, University of Queensland, 1958, Noel Butlin Archives Centre, ANU, Canberra.

Sydney study) lived in university college accommodation, enjoying the women-only community that this offered. They too were constrained by the disciplinary rules that characterized so many institutions for women. But they also attended classes with men on the university campus. Many more lived at home or in lodgings. Their experience then was similar in many ways to the women who attended the large state universities in the United States, such as the University of Michigan or the University of Texas at Austin. Yet when we turn to their stories of university life and its aftermath the differences between institutions fade.

Studies of University of Michigan women of the class of 1967, while not quite fitting the period of this book – they were after all ‘the quintessential members of that turbulent cohort called the 1960s generation’,¹⁰¹ ‘the leading edge of the baby boom’,¹⁰² – are helpful for comparison. There too women were extensively studied, most notably through Matina Horner’s well-known research on women’s motives for avoiding success conducted in the mid-1960s.¹⁰³ There too researchers found women experiencing both the traditional expectations of ‘marriage, motherhood and successful husbands by whom we could be defined’ and for many a harsh realization that younger women and the impact of women’s liberation were totally rewriting the script, urging them to redefine themselves as independent. ‘I’m a survivor’, wrote one, ‘proud of it, and no doubt not the only woman my age who’s had to shift gears. We’re the ones, I think, who really do have it all!’¹⁰⁴

In Australia Madge Dawson’s study of married women graduates of the University of Sydney was a response to the fact that although Australian educated women had been ‘the subject of comment they

101 Sandra Tangri and Sharon Rae Jenkins, ‘The University of Michigan class of 1967: the women’s life paths study’ in Hulbert and Schuster, *Women’s lives through time*, p. 259.

102 p. 263.

103 Horner, ‘Towards an understanding of achievement-related conflicts in women’, cited in Tangri and Jenkins, ‘The University of Michigan class of 1967’, p. 261.

104 p. 281.

had not been the subject of serious study'.¹⁰⁵ Many conclusions reveal Australian women to be facing the same issues as their American sisters. Most, for instance, attended university to prepare for a career, others to seek a broader culture or from intellectual interests. There were however some other issues that were specific to Australia. Dawson recorded that the proportion of women students coming from private secondary schools rose from the earliest days (i.e. from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) and the state high school proportion fell. This is a key aspect of a particularly Australian concern with the social origins of its students, one that may not have as much salience in the US where private secondary schools do not play such a major part.

Looking at married women graduates' family formation over the twentieth century Dawson claimed that a trend towards earlier marriage was clear, paralleling that of the population at large.¹⁰⁶ Yet graduates never married quite as early as the norm. In 1966 the median age at first marriage for Australian women with degrees was 24.4, a year and a third later than the average age of those who had completed high school.¹⁰⁷ They bore their children later and had smaller families. In this sense their social clock was set a little later than most, both harking back to an earlier period and pointing the way forward. Women graduates increasingly married professional men (largely teachers and doctors), and their marriages were 'more durable': fewer were widowed or divorced than women in the wider population at similar ages.

Religion played a strong part in the study. Dawson found women of Roman Catholic faith to be clearly underrepresented in university ranks. Jewish women, on the other hand, were overrepresented in rela-

105 Dawson, *Graduate and married*, p. xii.

106 Dawson, *Graduate and married*.

107 P.F. McDonald, 'Marriage in Australia: age at first marriage and proportions marrying, 1860-1971', Australian Family Formation Project Monograph No. 2, Department of Demography, Australian National University, Canberra, 1974, p. 214.

tion to their numbers in the wider population.¹⁰⁸ One Jewish graduate employed a novel explanation for this fact:

With Jewish women I think it's a cultural thing [citing a book] ... one of the theories she puts forward is that for thousands of years the elite thing amongst Jews was for the men to study so that the women earned a living and ran the businesses. And they were mainly trades people and merchants ... and so to succeed you have to be quite pushy, and so the culture, especially in Europe in the little towns, and the women were the movers and shakers, although they didn't have the elite [habit] of praying and studying which was for the men.¹⁰⁹

This woman joked about wanting to be tall and blonde and the ambivalence of trying to be a docile, desirable 50s women and a 'pushy' Jewish girl.

Interestingly Dawson found that many women reported a decline in their faith, or at least their observance, after their university study. The decline in religious affiliation was greater in those with honours degrees than in pass students¹¹⁰ prompting Dawson to speculate about how far university education is responsible for the decline in religious belief. An American student at UCLA felt that she could date the exact moment of her apostasy. It occurred in a particular first-year philosophy lecture on western rational thought and the history of secular humanism: 'Descartes' argument that free will proceeds from the rational mind dealt the final blow to my Lutheran beliefs'.¹¹¹

108 Dawson, *Graduate and married*, p. 61.

109 Interview for 'Graduating in the fifties' project.

110 Dawson, *Graduate and married*, p. 65.

111 Banner, *Finding Fran*, p. 111. But there were many who found a great sense of spiritual and social community in religious organizations. See, for instance, Howe, *A century of influence*.

The best of times – or the worst?

The graduate cohort of the 1950s and early 60s was a transitional generation, a pivotal group, a swing bridge between the traditionalists and the liberationists without a doubt. Studies of the cohort itself, and others comparing it with earlier cohorts, all tend to support the transitional nature of the classes of the 1950s and early 60s. But it is another matter to see that generation as having the best of all possible worlds, except perhaps in retrospect. It rarely felt like it at the time for the women who led the way. It was particularly hard for those who tried to cross the barriers into academic work, a male bastion in both Australia and the US. Women might become tutors in universities as Mary Goldsmith had but the next step to a permanent post in a research university was harder to achieve in both Australia and the US.¹¹² It certainly did not feel like ‘the best’ for one woman making her way in a science faculty. Although she never married the prospect of marriage shaped her career just as surely as if she had.

Not knowing how to play the game

Helen,¹¹³ an eldest daughter of an Australian family, attended a well-established university, encouraged strongly by her mother, who had been denied higher education. Helen studied for a science degree, choosing a biological stream as was appropriate for a woman who had been discouraged as a girl at high school from an intensive study of physics and chemistry. During her final (senior) year Helen attempted to secure a position with a major scientific agency in her field but was dissuaded by the man who headed the section: it would be ‘a waste of time training a woman who would quit after a few years’.¹¹⁴ However,

112 See Rossiter, *Women scientists in America*, for a full account of women in science during this period.

113 Not her real name.

114 Interview for ‘Graduating in the fifties’ project.

as she performed well in her exams Helen was offered a post as demonstrator in her university department. She was to complete a masters degree part time over 5 years. Thus began a satisfying career in science which included travel to overseas research laboratories where she mixed with internationally famous scientists, enjoyed an American exchange, worked with stimulating colleagues and engaged in cutting edge research. But there was little academic progress.

Helen was delighted with her post at first, flattered as many women were to have been appointed (that climate of unexpectation?). But, she claimed, 'little did I realize how long I would be at the bottom of the pile, while men – if appointed to low rank – would hold it for just one year before being appointed lecturer'. On her return from the US Helen was made a senior demonstrator, a minor post in an Australian university, one seldom held by men. It did not include the entitlement to sabbatical leave that higher posts did. There she remained for 11 years, finally gaining tenure as a lecturer, usually the base point for Australian male academic careers.

While she finally enjoyed a sabbatical year Helen was rarely supported financially for her trips to conferences and other laboratories as colleagues were. In retrospect she felt she gave more time to the department than many of her male colleagues, acting in key positions (usually unrewarded) for scientific congresses. Now, looking back, she feels she had no mentors or role models: she 'did not know how to play the game to my advantage' and felt that 'networking was not a female pursuit at the time'. The offer of early retirement was a final indignity for Helen, who lost her last study leave. 'It was explained to me that it would not be financially to my benefit to work out my time until I was 65. I continued to work just until the end of the year (trapped into marking exam papers)'. She was upset to hear a male colleague who had benefited from her taking his classes say, 'You won't catch me doing that when I retire'.

Dawson noted that more than one fifth of the Sydney women over 64 were still working. Perhaps they were making up for lost time.¹¹⁵

115 See also Yohalem, *The careers of professional women*.

Helen, it seems, was precipitated out of the university with about as little sense of autonomy as she had entered it. But any feeling of flattery had long given way to a degree of bitterness, a feeling that she had given more than her ‘pint of blood’, as she put it. Helen did not consider herself initially a ‘career women’ but ‘in not marrying, that is effectively what I became’. Later she described herself as literally ‘married to the university’, a fairly unsatisfactory spouse we might conclude.

Science did not offer a warmer welcome to young American graduates as Margaret Rossiter has shown – the ‘golden age of science’ was in fact ‘a very dark age for women’.¹¹⁶ As American colleges and universities ramped up their research efforts in the period from 1945 to 1972, one of record growth and affluence in the sector, and of well recognized ‘manpower’ needs, forces acted against women’s inclusion in the expanding scientific and academic workforces. Anti-nepotism laws worked against women’s employment. Men were frequently preferred for continuing posts, as they were deemed to be more reliable in their commitment. The urgency to staff new universities and colleges with research-ready faculty led to a preference for those with PhDs. As small US institutions remade themselves as state universities some of the older long-serving women staff were made to feel unwelcome and undervalued. ‘The best many such women could do’, Rossiter argued, ‘was to retire as soon as possible, hurt, confused and angry that they were being so hastily and unceremoniously cast aside’.¹¹⁷ Young women heard that message: the profile of Radcliffe student Bebe Mensch noted that she was a chemistry major. ‘However’, the profile continued,

after her graduation, science will become no more than a hobby in her life. Because of low pay and meager opportunities in the chemistry field she hopes to enter the executive training program of a NY dept store and prove her theory that retail and merchandising is a good field for women.¹¹⁸

116 Rossiter, *Women scientists in America*, p 123.

117 p. 191.

118 *The Radcliffe News*, 13 January 1950, p. 2.

Not whether ... but how

Institutional support for women is critical, as Linda Eisenmann has argued¹¹⁹ and Helen's story underlines. The American Association of University Women (AAUW) was determined to provide support to women through a fellowship scheme instituted to help professional women continue their careers. The question for the association was 'no longer whether to marry, but rather how best the married scholar can combine the responsibilities of professional and family life'.¹²⁰ An article titled 'Not whether ... but how' traced the careers of two former married fellows to see how they had fared. Virginia Beaver (now Mrs Grover Platt [sic]), Margaret Snell Fellowship recipient, followed her doctorate in history with 'hunting for evidence of colonial smuggling in out-of-the-way places, in old merchant account books and other shipping records'. Beaver, the article proudly noted, was now an associate professor at Bowling Green University, Ohio, where she taught American history and her husband, a professor, taught European history.¹²¹ A photograph portrays the archetypal academic [and fifties] family: husband, wife and two children, daughters Carolyn and Phyllis. The article explained 'how' Virginia Beaver managed to save time and simplify living to run her busy life: 'I try to buy clothes for the girls that require a minimum of ironing and I keep our meals as simple as possible, and use time-savers in preparing them'.

We do not learn whether Beaver, like many Australian women with degrees, had outside help. Dawson found that the Australian high income group (which would certainly include couples like Beaver and her academic husband) 'had 60 percent of all paid help', 'giving no support to the view so often heard that Australian women do not have domestic help'.¹²² Mary Goldsmith too mentioned household help when she was teaching at universities. This issue remains hidden here

119 Linda Eisenmann, 'Befuddling the "feminine mystique": academic women and the creation of the Radcliffe Institute', *Education Foundations*, 10, 1996, pp. 5–26.

120 'Not whether ... but how', *Journal of the AAUW*, 48(2), 1955, p. 91.

121 Ibid.

122 Dawson, *Graduate and married*, p. 49.

as Beaver expounded her working patterns: 'intensive studying, library work and preparation for classes are left until after the girls are in bed at night; and she and her husband try to reserve the hours between four and seven for family activities'.¹²³ Nevertheless, it was difficult and Beaver admitted that at times 'you get a feeling that you're not doing justice to your children'. The AAUW journalist was at pains to dispel those feelings of guilt (role conflict?). 'But since their mother is with them almost all the hours that they are not in school and seldom accepts an invitation for a week-night, such doubts can have little basis in reality'.¹²⁴

Another former fellow featured in the article, Mary Hohiesel, also an associate professor, the mother of two children and wife of a professor, believed that success in combining marriage and career depends on 'a lot of compromising and a certain amount of humour'.¹²⁵ She had a husband who 'digs in and helps', a daughter who made her own school lunch, 'adequate household help' and 'that important extra ingredient', good health.¹²⁶ Here then were two good models for the pattern of combining marriage and career that would have appealed to the many graduate readers of the journal. The availability of fellowships, the moral support and role modelling involved, was a key factor in maintaining a professional identity for many highly educated US women. Such support might have made a huge difference to Helen's professional career. Strikingly both AAUW fellowship holders were arts graduates, a historian and an anthropologist.

Jill Ker, contemplating her marriage to Canadian academic John Conway, also thought about the 'how' of career and marriage:

I was too interested in a career to fit the going style of male/female pairings. I didn't want to become the typical Cambridge-style wife – superbly educated, somebody else's muse – much admired for her conversation and her excellent, crusty, homemade bread ... We were not seeking a merging of identities in the

123 'Not whether ... but how', p. 92.

124 Ibid.

125 Ibid.

126 Ibid.

romantic mode, but an enhancement of each identity, through access to the other's broader experience.¹²⁷

Jill Ker had also benefited from a Harvard fellowship, as had Charlotte Painter, later a writer whose works questioned issues around motherhood. Painter's well-received book, *Who made the lamb: confession from a Malaga madhouse*, which questioned woman's role as mother, was compared with Kesey's *One flew over the cuckoo's nest*.

Painter corresponded with several of the well-known women writers of the time. A letter of appreciation from Adrienne Rich on the publication of one of Painter's works contains a striking image of women at home writing in the earlier pre-women's movement days as women in house arrest.¹²⁸

'Being someone's else's muse', 'in house arrest': these images suggested that at least at that stage the 'best of all possible worlds' had not been achieved. But Bardwick predicted that the women born in the 1930s and 40s would be in that happy situation *in the 1980s* and highly educated women such as 'Helen', Jill Ker Conway, 'Mary Goldsmith', Virginia Beaver and Charlotte Painter were all in varied ways helping to create that next world, that bridge for younger women to cross.

In this chapter we have seen that the cohort of the 1950s and early 60s was indeed a transitional group, pioneering multiple roles as mothers, career women, graduate students, on a large scale and entering the workforce as married women in unprecedented numbers. Were they also the proto-feminists who ignited the sparks for the renewed women's movement of the late 1960s and 70s? In the next chapter we look at educated women graduates of the 1950s and early 60s and their attitudes to women's place, to motherhood, and their participation in, their creation of, and in some cases their rejection of, the movement that was to shape the next generation.

127 Conway, *True north*, pp. 72, 87.

128 Charlotte Painter papers, 1 January 1977, Special Collections, Stanford University.