

# A POCKET OF EMPOWERMENT? WOMEN'S MEMORIES OF SELECTIVE SCHOOLING IN NEWCASTLE, 1930s TO 1950s

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## Abstract

This paper examines the educational experiences and outcomes of a small group of women who attended Newcastle Girls High School in the period 1930s to the 1950s. It utilises oral history methodology, informed by feminist philosophy and practice. The paper shows two ways of approaching the data. The first represents the traditional oral history methodology and explores the schooling experience from the students' point of view including reflections about teachers and subjects. The second approach searches out motifs within and across the testimonies to reveal mythologies about those experiences. Overall the paper concludes that, despite their divergent recollections, the school empowered the women to carve out a role for themselves within the restricted gender regime. It further suggests how the concept of selective schooling might be sustained by mythologies about it discovered in the women's words.

Selective schooling has been reintroduced only recently into the New South Wales education system after an absence, not total, of about twenty years. This move was greeted with muted criticism and equally muted praise, and was grounded in very little historical research into the nature and effects of such schooling. In this paper I explore the oral history testimonies of a small group of women who attended Newcastle Girls High School in the period from the 1930s to the 1950s. The research is grounded in the calls by feminist historians, Marilyn Lake and Judith Allen, for almost a decade now, not just for the reinstatement of women into the historical record, but for a history that employs gender as its primary analytic category, and has as its product "a history of the sexes". Furthermore, in the specialist field of the history of education, it follows the proposals of Jill Blackmore for a feminist philosophy and practice in which gender stands at the centre of the enquiry and subjectivities and complexities are embraced, rather than excised. Overall what emerges is that the women valued and enjoyed their educational experiences. Most of them achieved a career, and those who did not were responding to influences and events outside the ambit of their schooling. Within the more circumscribed gender regime of the period from the 1930s to the 1950s, selective, single-sex education provided a pocket of empowerment for girls. Further, women were well aware that gender played an important role in their lives. Finally, the analysis of the women's memories may help to explain why selective schooling has been such a hardy educational plant in New South Wales, growing out of a time regarded as more ordered, safe and secure than the present.

## ORAL HISTORY METHODOLOGY

In the historical construction of the past written documents have been accorded an almost mystical quality of integrity. Oral historians have been accused of practising, in the words of Patrick O'Farrell, "history of the heart, not the head" (8). Lately, however, oral historians, as they respond to the challenges of their critics and grapple with the theoretical implications of their craft, have discovered a new role for oral history that may be best described as a change

of the name of their enterprise to the history of consciousness. They are now interested not only in the data oral testimony reveals, but also in the way mythologies frame our experience of the past (Holbrook 15-17; Samuel and Thompson; Passerini). Michael Frisch, outlining these developments, has observed: "By studying how experience, memory and history are combined [we can] track the elusive beasts of consciousness and culture." (13)

All the interviewees involved in this study are volunteers. The interviews were collected as part of a larger project entitled Youth At School and Work 1930s to 1950s, under the supervision of Dr Allyson Holbrook of the University of Newcastle, and in which the author is a research assistant. The interviewees enlisted in the study in response to media appeals and through letters to associations such as Senior Citizens groups, Old Girls and Old Boys associations and so on. After first contact they were supplied with information concerning the project and a time was set for the interview. The interviews usually lasted for an hour and a half, often longer, and followed the guidelines regarding content and procedure supplied by mail to the interviewees beforehand. The respondents usually displayed mementos, such as photographs and school reports, which were discussed over a cup of tea. All the women, after counselling about their rights in the matter, signed unconditional release forms, including permission to use their names. The interviewer found that the women were happy to discuss their memories of school and to range freely over their lives. Further, as far as was possible, the interviewer did not interfere with this process. Each interview generated about twenty-five to thirty pages of transcript and the author transcribed most of the material employed in this paper using the methods described in the paper by Holbrook *et al*, "From Interview to Analysis".

Analysis of the oral history data has proceeded by triangulation, recommended by Holbrook. In this methodology, primary and secondary written documentation is collected and analysed along with the oral material, which nevertheless remains at the centre of the study. Further the analysis is layered. First, the tapes and transcripts are listened to and read in a holistic way, to get the "feel" of the material, the style and shape of the stories. Then data are extracted concerning the events and experiences revealed in them. This material is collated and cross checked with other oral testimonies and the written sources, archival, secondary and theoretical. Finally the researcher focuses again on the transcripts, searching out the deep structures, the mythic formations, within the oral material. This is achieved by noting key patterns and phrases (Chanfault-Duchet 81; Tonkin 97; Fentress and Wickham 6ff). In this last layer of the analysis the oral histories can expose the images of the past held across individuals about education and its effects that so powerfully shape present concerns.

## THE CONTEXT AND THE WOMEN

The study centres on Newcastle, a major provincial Australian city, in the period from the 1930s to the 1950s. Secondary education began in Newcastle in 1906 with the establishment of a high school at the old infants department of Newcastle Public School. Prior to this time students had to travel to Maitland, where two of the first select high schools in the state were set up in 1884 (NGHS File). Education in the city entered a new phase when, in 1929 and 1930 respectively, two select high schools, one for girls and one for boys, opened their doors (Government Schools 187). The Newcastle Girls High School was built on land at Hamilton acquired for the purpose in 1913. The building cost £36,395 and had seventeen classrooms and other specialist areas, as well as an assembly hall for 545 people, a spacious library and a gymnasium. The entrance contained, in the architect's words, "an imposing portico, with a balcony above" (NGHS File). In 1930 forty two girls sat for the Leaving Certificate and by

1956, the number had grown to seventy nine (Cleary *et al* 4). The school became an important feature of the educational landscape in Newcastle and sat at the top of the educational ladder for girls until it was changed to a co-educational non-selective school in 1975. The six women discussed in this paper attended Newcastle Girls High School from 1944 until 1951. All but two, Rose and Meg, were born and educated in the Newcastle area.

Rose was born in 1931 in the Queensland town of Innisfail to an Italian family. She had one sibling, a younger brother. The family moved to Newcastle in 1936 where her mother was a dressmaker and her father ran a Billiards Room. Both her parents valued education and her father was particularly proud when his daughter was chosen to attend Newcastle Girls High. The family had only modest means and this situation was made worse when Rose's father died when she was sixteen. Afterwards, Rose was grateful to her mother for allowing her to stay on at school as this entailed considerable sacrifice. Rose thoroughly enjoyed her schooling and determined very early that she would be a teacher, an ambition which she fulfilled. She worked as a primary school teacher before and after her marriage and she retired only recently (Greenwell Interview).

The second woman, Grace, was also born in 1931, the fifth child in a blended working class family of eight children, only one of whom was a boy. Her mother divorced Grace's father and had remarried before Grace started school. She described her stepfather as "the sergeant major type", a man who believed that girls should not be bothered with books but should be engaged in home duties. Throughout her childhood, Grace only saw her natural father on weekend outings. Her mother was a "highly intelligent woman" who was burdened by looking after so many children "with not a lot of support". She had however considerable home-making skills, although Grace commented that she would have preferred a "bit more order". Further, Grace was well aware of her family's low socio-economic status and found her home life chaotic and frustrating. Grace had to leave high school at the beginning of fourth year in order to help her mother with her ever-increasing family. She later became a bank clerk until she married. After many years of mothering she returned to study and became a special education teacher. She now devotes her time to her church and to her family (Thorpe Interview).

Meg, born in 1931, grew up in the northern New South Wales town of Werris Creek among her extended family. She was the second child of four: three girls and one boy. Her father ran a small mixed business and she had, in her own words, "a happy sort of childhood". In 1943 the family moved to Newcastle at her mother's instigation as she did not want her girls to grow up as she had done with the limited horizons offered by a railway town like Werris Creek. The fact that Meg won a bursary, which was means-tested, shows that the family income was modest. Meg completed her studies at Newcastle Girls High, after which she became a teacher. She taught both here and in England, in both state and private schools, and also worked as a journalist. She attained her Bachelor of Arts at the University of Newcastle after retiring from teaching when she was fifty six (Barcan Interview).

A more equivocal story is told by the fourth woman, Elaine, who was born in 1932. Like Grace, Elaine grew up in a working-class, blended family consisting in this case of three boys and two girls. The family had difficulty securing permanent accommodation during the Depression that lasted in Newcastle until the outbreak of World War Two (Gray), but finally settled in a dark, gun-barrel house in Tighes Hill, where her father lived until he was ninety. While he was a labourer at Stewarts and Lloyds and "a very loud sort of man", with little education, her mother was a trained teacher who quietly accepted the difficult conditions of her life. Elaine observed not once but twice during the interview that her mother never complained about anything despite the fact that they were poor. Elaine grew up conscious of the fact that others were better off, and commented that this early awareness led her to have a inferiority complex for a long time. She attained her Leaving Certificate and, although her

parents were proud of her achievements, they did nothing to encourage her in her education. She did not take up the offer of a teachers college scholarship and became a clerk at Stewards and Lloyds until she married and had her first child. She later worked as an administrative assistant in public schools. She is now retired (Richards Interview).

By contrast with the modest beginnings of the first four women, the last two, Margaret and Jane, had quite comfortable home lives. Margaret was born in 1932 and grew up in Toronto, then primarily a village of weekenders on the shores of Lake Macquarie. Her father was a successful businessman, who had topped Australia in his accountancy exams. He was a man who valued the life of the mind and beautiful things. Margaret has come to see that she is like her father. Her mother, although a highly intelligent woman, was "very much a person of the body". She dominated the home and did not allow her family to interfere with her interests, especially her tennis. It was Margaret's aunt who saw to the four children when they were ill. The family also had a maid. Very early Margaret showed an aptitude and love for things intellectual. She was also a devoted musician. Her mother did not quite approve of these inclinations. Although the term was not then in use, Margaret now describes herself as a "gifted child". Throughout high school and Sydney University, where she studied and then taught pharmacy, Margaret achieved excellent results. The ease of her intellect however was offset by difficulties of the body for Margaret suffered from gynaecological problems from the age of twelve until she was thirty six, when she underwent major surgery. Her early ambitions to be a doctor were thwarted by her father and she was made to become a pharmacist in her father's chemist shop. She has practised as a pharmacist ever since and still pursues her piano studies (Caldwell Interview).

Jane was born in 1934. She was raised in a stable, Methodist, middle-class household. Jane's childhood, as the youngest of three children, was happy, secure and well-regulated. Both her parents had known early difficulty in their childhood and by dint of hard work had raised themselves up to a comfortable lifestyle. Her father was an electrical engineer and "quite an intellectual man". Her mother, also highly intelligent and articulate, was a full-time homemaker who was also a marvellous dressmaker. Her parents were keen on education and she received every encouragement and did well in her Leaving Certificate. She attained her Bachelor of Arts from the University of New England and became a teacher. After teaching in England, she became and still works as a librarian (Scott Interview).

## THE EXPERIENCE OF SELECTIVE SECONDARY SCHOOLING

Students were chosen to attend Newcastle Girls High on their academic performance and intelligence testing undertaken in primary school. Often only a small number of children, sometimes only one from the smaller schools in the district, were selected. Margaret, for example, was the only girl to attend from Toronto. The women vividly remember their feelings about the transition to high school and all except Jane found the experience an equivocal one. While they were sensible of the honour of being selected to Girls High and freely observed Newcastle Girls High School's position at the top of the educational ladder in the city as evidence of it, they were daunted at first by it. For example, Meg was "very nervous" about starting high school' and Rose said that "it was very awe-inspiring to get to Girls High". Margaret remembered that it was:

... scary, very scary for me. Lonely. I can remember the first day going and feeling like I was on another planet, it was so different. I can remember looking at this school because I'd come from Toronto school which was little and friendly, and here was this school. I can remember the bareness of it. Ours was full of flowers and here was this concrete jungle...It was a two storey building, I can remember feeling sort of overwhelmed.

## Grace recalled:

I felt pretty daunted. I didn't feel terribly excited but I rather liked the thought [of] that little bit of prestige that I'd got to Girls High.

Despite their ambivalence the girls settled into the school routine although Grace became involved in a disruptive group in her first year. These girls, however, were not disruptive in their second and third years. The strict and smooth operation of the school, it seemed, brought them into line.

The women remembered their subjects and their teachers very clearly. The curriculum offered was academic. Two broad streams were created: the A and C classes undertook languages (French, Latin and German) and the B and D classes studied, along with the core curriculum (English, Science, Maths 1 and 2, History and Geography) Art and Needlework. Jane observed that these last two were frowned upon. Subjects were refined after the Intermediate Certificate. For example, Combined Science (Physics and Chemistry) was broken down into elective streams: Chemistry and Biology, with the latter seen as a soft option. For example, the Principal attempted to talk Margaret out of Biology in favour of German, but Margaret was adamant that she would have as broad an education as she could get. Her parents, more out of "benign neglect" than conviction, supported her choice. Meg and Grace particularly liked Maths, while Jane loved languages and Elaine was especially fond of English. Margaret was good at everything. She topped the state in her Leaving in Chemistry and came third in French.

Performance in a subject was not only related to what the girls were good at; it often had to do with the teacher. Elaine's favourite teacher was her English teacher, whom she describes as "lovely". She went on to say that she held all of her teachers in awe, although she has since realised that they were probably only ordinary people. Overall the best remembered teachers were the strict ones, the "hard taskmasters". Meg, for example, liked both her English teacher, even though she remembered thinking of her as cruel on at least one occasion, and her science teacher, also a demanding disciplinarian, whom she described as the most wonderful teacher in the school. Of her she said:

All her girls worked for her because they loved her and they wouldn't have wanted to get anything wrong. But she was a harsh taskmaster, you really had to be in there. If you missed experiments you had to come in on the early train and do them and your copy books had to be perfect. Your diagrams were done in fine pen and indian ink, and she tested every Monday. We felt we were doing this because we didn't want to disappoint her, not because we were driven or afraid of her. She was wonderful in getting you to work for her.

Grace's favourite, her Maths teacher, had, in her words, "full control of her life". The class would be standing before she entered the room and twenty mental calculations would be undertaken at the start of every lesson. Woe betide the girl who did not have her pencil sharpened and poised ready for the test. She further remembers that all the teachers at Girls High were "efficient and effective" and that they never strolled anywhere but walked briskly. Jane found all her teachers sympathetic, particularly her English teacher, who had a marvellous skill of putting lipstick on without a mirror. Elaine claimed that the teachers were probably "the pick" because of Newcastle Girls High's selective status. Finally, Rose liked one of her teachers so well that she kept a special diary in which to record when this teacher graced her with a smile. Rose wryly observes that this would surely be misconstrued today.

One subject that these teachers did not teach was sex education. Although one of the women, Elaine, did not mention it, the others commented on the dearth of information provided on the subject both in and out of school. Jane, Grace and Meg all reflected on their innocence. Meg described one of the effects of her schooling as "a legacy of immaturity". Rose

speaks of her first menstruation as a "big shock" and that she learnt the facts of life from her friends. It is Margaret, however, because she had such a difficult time at physical maturation, who spoke about it most. Margaret had her first period at the age of twelve, when she was in second year. She feels that it was "ridiculous" that in a school of 700 girls they were not taught the elementary functioning of their bodies. Likewise at home, her mother, although identified by Margaret as a woman "of the body", refused to discuss the matter with her. Margaret's mother would not even say "mucous membrane" as she considered the words disgusting. She further comments on the primitive sanitary wear available at a time of no commercial pads or tampons. Margaret's difficulties led to her not engaging in any sporting activities. Later her father told her that boys would only want "one thing" from her and left the matter there...

The school provided a host of activities outside the normal curriculum ranging from sports to debating and drama. Ideals of public service, promoted by the prestigious private schools, were part of the unofficial curriculum at the school. Elaine, for example, along with her special friends, was responsible for various charity projects, such as knitting a blanket for the Old People's Home in Waratah and raising money for The Soldiers Comfort Fund during the war. Many of the girls gave some time to peel vegetables in the Soldiers Canteen in the town, a pet project of the royalist on staff. The School Dances held at Newcastle Boys High, though "strictly organised", were very popular, and when those boys attended a combined athletic carnival, the girls, in Rose's words, "went mad". Elaine remembers it was the fashion to collect the boys' autographs in books carried especially for the purpose.

Overall the women remember that they enjoyed their time at Newcastle Girls High. According to Rose, school pride was very high and "you were proud to wear the uniform", which was strictly enforced down to hats and gloves, although on this last point Elaine disagrees. While making a deeper point she said:

It wasn't an elite school that only well-to-do people went there at all. It was only elite in that you were intelligent...it certainly wasn't elite in that everyone was well off and you had to dress accordingly...I never had a pair of school gloves and you never had to wear stockings. You didn't have to wear a tie all the time or anything like that.

The students were encouraged by their teachers to be aware of the privilege of being one of the few. The praise for their schooling is not completely unqualified however. Elaine claimed that "you were not encouraged to think of yourself" and Jane described the education provided as "narrow and academic". Meg remembers that there was "considerable pressure" all the way through and that the students were "driven", a judgement concurred with by Margaret. Meg suffered nightmares about failing exams for some time after she left school. Nevertheless, she considered it was "all a part of the joy". In the end Margaret believed that she received a "very, very good education" that would last a lifetime.

## **AFTER SCHOOL**

All the women were encouraged by their schooling to think in terms of a professional career and most of them carved out a career for themselves within the circumscribed gender regime of the day so well outlined by Meg:

Well it was expected that we would all go on to further study. We all went into teaching or pharmacy or journalism or many of us did something to do with accountancy or nursing. I suppose that was next. Many of us did nursing. These were the sorts of things the girls from Girls High went into. The girls I knew [did]. I don't know what the others did. I suppose if their parents were well-off enough they might have got office

Rose was the only one of the six, however, to do what she had always wanted to do, teaching, and even for her the secret ambition, "the very long dream", to be a pharmacist, was curtailed by her family's economic circumstances. At least the teachers college scholarship provided a living, a factor also in both Jane's and Meg's decision to teach. Jane, encouraged by her teachers and parents to go on to university, afterwards "drifted into teaching". She hated it and later became a librarian. Meg, too, eventually became a teacher even though her Chemistry teacher wanted her to be a pharmacist because she was so very good at Maths and Science. Meg's mother refused because of the cost of the training. It was this teacher also who personally obtained Meg's first job in an accountancy firm in the city.

The stories of the other three women, Margaret, Grace and Elaine, show in sharp relief how restrictive forces outside of school proved to be. In Margaret's case it was not lack of money that prevented her from following her desire to be a doctor, but her father. Margaret never wanted to be what she became, a pharmacist, and has always felt resentful of her father's "cruel" refusal. After her excellent results in the Leaving, her science teacher at Girls High rang her to encourage her to defy her father and become a doctor anyway. She said "You couldn't go against your father in those days".

For Grace, the matter was taken out of her hands at the beginning of fourth year when her mother, who had previously assured her she could continue her schooling, informed her as she was getting ready for the first day of her senior studies, that she was not to go but was to remain at home to assist her with the housework:

Now she had said to me through the year and it had been my expectation built up that I would continue, that I would be that incredible, never heard of thing in our experience, able to go on to the Leaving Certificate in year five (sic)...she assured me of that... students of our class [at school] were expected to go on to the Leaving. At home and in my community amongst the relatives, no, girls didn't.

Grace's mother was at the time expecting her seventh child. Even though the principal of Girls High tried to convince her that Grace should return to school the next year, the matter was settled. Grace spent a year at home and then her mother found her work. After years of marriage and child-rearing Grace experienced very low self-esteem. She remembered thinking that she used to be regarded as intelligent at school, why was she now so stupid? After some community work she finally summoned the courage to attend a university entrance course offered at the University of Newcastle and achieved the ambition to be a teacher which she had held at Girls High. Being chosen to attend the top academic school of her day stayed with Grace as a long-lasting reminder of her potential.

Elaine's story demonstrates the subtle power of the gender order. She had obtained a Bursary in the sixth class and a scholarship to continue school after the Intermediate; she passed the Leaving Certificate and obtained the offer of a teachers college scholarship. Despite this early promise, however, she did not pursue her studies. She felt that this was due to the lack of encouragement in her family and community summed up in the dictum "you'd only get married, so it's wasted", and, in a self-accusatory way, because she "rested on her laurels". She found it strange that she had been "so influenced by others, other people" and that she "just went along". The interview ended with Elaine observing that she regarded the Leaving Certificate as an ending, where she should have regarded it as a beginning:

That was the end of school, getting the Leaving. Well it should have been the opening which it would have been if I'd gone on, if I'd opened that door but I didn't.

## THE SEARCH FOR MYTHOLOGIES OF SCHOOLING

The oral history testimonies of the six women are rich in data about the experience of select schooling. This layer of analysis, traditionally associated with the oral history endeavour, provides a view rarely studied in the history of education, that is, the experience of schooling from the student's point of view. Indeed Harold Silver has complained that, in the history of education, "there are no classrooms, no children, no teaching, no learning" (104). Ronald Grele has observed that oral history has a crucial role to play in the historical reconstruction of memory and that questions of factual detail may be the least interesting way of approaching oral testimonies (69-70). Another approach, then, is to search out socio-cultural motifs and narrative structures that point to the existence of myth in memory.

The making of individual memory is, paradoxically, a profoundly social process. We are our memories. Our individuality is, to use a biological metaphor, a semi-permeable membrane, across which we interact with the social matrix. James Fentress and Chris Wickham have observed that, although memory is "simply subjective", it is also social since it is structured by "language, by teaching and observing, by collectively held ideas, and by experience shared with others" (6). Further memory tends toward simplification and schematisation. According to Roland Barthes, "myth prefers to work with poor, incomplete images, where meaning is already relieved of its fat, and ready for signification" (137). Myths, it should be added, are not lies, they are "inflexions" (140). Memory therefore is fertile ground for myth.

Marie Francoise Chanfrault-Duchet has suggested a way to uncover these deep structures by employing, at one stage, techniques arising from narratology, and at another, those of textual analysis. In the first way, key patterns, narrative genres, are detected, embodying particular visions of history (81). In the second way, key phrases in the oral narratives define the relationship between the self and the society. However, she stipulates that such an interpretive model can only be employed when the life histories are unstructured, as even a semi-structured interview overdetermines the product. She is overly scrupulous. Since narrative structures exist a priori within an individual's psyche as frameworks of meaning and permeate all facets of her sense-making, it seems unlikely, even in semi-structured interviews such as those examined here, that such frameworks would be discomforted or indeed that they would be hidden. Memory is, in a sense, holographic: chip off one piece in an oral history interview and the whole picture is there in miniature. It is embedded in the language. This is what I found. Further, while acknowledging my debt to her stimulating work, I altered the analysis of key phrases to that of key words that recurred in the women's narratives. The repetitions that I found across the interviews, as well as within, pointed to particular and shared understandings of certain key sites such as the nature of their experiences of growing up, of select schooling and of the social milieu.

Entering the women's testimonies, then, utilising this interpretive model has revealed some interesting material about the agency each woman felt in the construction of her life. Their narratives also highlight their separate visions of history. Jane's story, for example, enshrines the power of providence. She employs words like "luck", "fortunate" and "charmed existence" to explain the serendipity of her life. Not only did she feel lucky at the micro level of her life with family, school and work, but even at the macro level of history. She said:

We really were the lucky generation. I mean I was born during the Depression but my father had work and we had a comfortable lifestyle. We were too young for the war and too old for Vietnam and the wars that followed it but also there was full employment.

Grace's narrative is patterned on the idea of redemption. Her triumph consisted in a return to

her potential, revealed to her at school, which led her out of her darkness through her abandonment of will to her god. From being in a situation so desperate that she recalled considering "all variations of suicide, murder, divorce", she was able eventually to go to Teachers College in response to a "strong inner voice...so much was my faith in god".

While these two stories attribute agency to forces without the individual, both Rose's and Meg's stories are ones of quiet achievement, a sense of mastery. Rose was even able to say that she was a bit of a "trailblazer" in working in the 1950s and 60s "without guilt" after she had children. Margaret too has had a full professional life, although the refusal of her father to allow her to study medicine still rankles. The final woman, Elaine, despite her basic optimism, told a story framed by resignation. Elaine is resigned to what she could have achieved, but didn't. This has led to a bemused acceptance and a belief that she is too old to worry about it all now. All of these stories constitute what Gayle Greene has called "enabling fictions", reconciling simultaneous temporalities of the past to the present and the future (297). These narrative styles point to disparate ways women have of accommodating their experiences. The various ascriptions of agency in them show that, even in a group of six, women are far from homogeneous in their responses to the gender regime.

However the women's individualities become less marked when the motifs in their descriptions of their schooling are examined. Indeed there is a high level of accord regarding the positive nature of the selective, single-sex schooling they received. Overall, they experienced their schooling as "strict", a word that occurs many times. "Strict" is not pejorative however, since they also enjoyed their school experience. Good education thus becomes strict education. In fact motifs of "order" and "structure" run throughout these testimonies. Grace reflected this when she said:

[Schooling then] was fairly predictable, fairly routine, rather more rote and orderly and prescribed, but for some, and perhaps for me, there was a degree of security in that order and predictability.

Margaret also commented that "there was regimentation, very strict. Bells rang and we changed classes." She had no difficulties with this but simply "swam along" in the stream. When asked how they would compare education now with education then, most of the women preferred the order they experienced to the chaos they now perceive in schools. Indeed, this whole theme suggests a mythology about a Golden Age of schooling now past. If this reflects a widespread belief, no wonder then that the reintroduction of selective schooling has been so warmly received (Wareham 170).

Another motif that might, but does not, reflect this mythology of a Golden Age, is innocence. The women all stressed their naivete while at school, the narrowness of their lives and their ignorance of matters sexual. Rose said:

When I looked back, we were held back a lot in my day...we didn't know that much, we didn't have any sex education at school. I remember a girlfriend of mine when I went to college asking how babies come. We looked at her and said "don't you know ?" She said "No, by kissing blokes?" That's a bit extreme but it did go on.

This innocence appears to be part of their awareness of the restrictive gender order within which they grew up. Teaching was, Margaret thought at the time, "a profession women might do". Jane was angry when she worked part-time while at school, that, although the boys on the job were lazy, they were paid more. Grace felt at the time, and still feels, that there was a double standard for men and women. She railed against cleaning her only brother's shoes and ironing and laying out his tennis clothes simply because he was a boy. Elaine did not pursue her teaching career because of a strong belief in her family and her community that she would only be getting married and it would be a waste. Margaret was forbidden to achieve her heart's

desire because medicine was associated with the body and therefore an unfit profession for a woman. Thus they were not only ignorant of their bodies, but restricted because of them as well. The Golden Age of school is apart from this Dark Age of withheld information and lack of equality. School and society are antithetical. Grace puts this well when she said:

In my day, selective schools would have, and did [help students to reach their full potential]. Mind you, society wasn't ready for women to achieve their potential but the potential was created there.

The school encouraged the girls to think in terms of a career. It empowered them by confirming their intelligence and usefulness. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in Grace's case. The long memory of her promise allowed her to reclaim her potential at midlife. The school's positive effect on the girls, however, could not change the fact that fathers refused their daughters' dreams, as in Margaret's story, or that mothers needed help at home, as with Grace, or that girls' academic ambitions were not valued in the working-class society of the day, exemplified by Elaine. Nevertheless, the selective, single-sex schooling that the girls received provided a pocket of empowerment within the wider society.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of the memories of the six women who attended Newcastle Girls High that has been outlined here reveals two ways of approaching the data. The first way aids in our knowledge and understanding of the school experience for women in the years preceding, during and after World War Two. The collection and presentation of women's memories in itself is important to the historical record in the history of education. The second approach involves narrative analysis and highlights the different ways enabling fictions, within which issues of agency are ascribed, are constructed to make sense of and accommodate lived experience. Further some textual analysis, centring on key words, shows that there are lateral correspondences across the texts that suggest a rhizomic operation of shared perceptions, or framing mythologies, such as The Golden Age and The Dark Age. In further studies Chanfrault-Duchet's suggestion of employing key phrases to discern the relationship of the subject with the society will also be explored. It will be most interesting to compare these narrative styles and textual features across the testimonies of both women and men in the larger study. There is much work to be done.

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