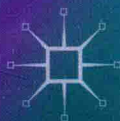


# WOMEN EDUCATORS, LEADERS AND ACTIVISTS

Educational Lives and  
Networks 1900-1960

Editors:

**TANYA FITZGERALD** and  
**ELIZABETH M. SMYTH**



# Women Educators, Leaders and Activists

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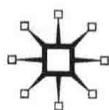
**Tanya Fitzgerald**

*La Trobe University, Australia*

**Elizabeth M. Smyth**

*University of Toronto, Canada*

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# Contributors

**Patricia A. Carter** is Clinical Associate Professor, Department of Educational Policy Studies, Georgia State University, USA. Her books include *Everybody's Paid but the Teacher: The Teaching Profession and the Women's Movement* (2003) and *Globalizing Education for Work: Comparative Perspectives on Gender and the New Economy* (with Richard Lakes, 2004). She is currently at work on a book-length biography of Henrietta Rodman.

**Tanya Fitzgerald** is Professor of Educational Leadership, Management and History at La Trobe University, Australia. She is the author of numerous books and articles on the history of women's education and contemporary perspectives on leadership and policy in higher education, including *Outsiders or Equals? A History of Women Professors at the University of New Zealand 1911–1961* (2009), *Historical Portraits of Women Home Scientists: The University of New Zealand 1907–1947* (2011, with Jenny Collins) *Hard Labour? Academic Work and the Changing Landscape of Higher Education* (2012, with Julie White and Helen M. Gunter) and *Women Leaders in Higher Education: Shattering the Myths* (2014).

**Joyce Goodman** is Pro-Vice Chancellor, Dean of the Faculty of Education, Health and Social Care and Professor of History of Education at the University of Winchester, UK. She is former editor of *History of Education*, past president of the History of Education Society GB and former secretary of the International Standing Conference for the History of Education. Her most recent books include *Women and Education: Major Themes in Education* (2011, 4 volumes) with Jane Martin and *Girls' Secondary Education in the Western World* (2010) with James Albisetti and Rebecca Rogers. Her current research focuses on empire and internationalism in girls' schooling, women's higher education and women's work in and for education.

**Judith Harford** is Head of Research and Director of the Professional Diploma in Education at the School of Education, University College Dublin, Ireland. She has published internationally in the areas of gender and education, history of education and teacher education research. She is Co-ordinator of the Teacher Education Policy in Europe

(TEPE) Network and Link Convenor of the Teacher Education Research Network of the European Educational Research Association (EERA). She serves on several committees of the State Department of Education and Skills and the Teaching Council of Ireland. She is series editor for Peter Lang: Oxford ('Re-Thinking Education' Series) and serves on the editorial boards of several international journals. She was recently a Visiting Research Associate at the Faculty of Policy and Society, Institute of Education, University of London.

**Jonathan Mane-Wheoki** (Ngāpuhi/Te Aupouri/Ngāti Kuri) has pioneered the development of contemporary Māori and Pacific art and art history. He is an art, architectural and cultural historian and curator. He has served as Dean of Music and Fine Arts at the University of Canterbury, Director of Art and Collection Services, and Head of Arts and Visual Culture at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Jonathan is currently Professor of Fine Arts and Head of the Elam School of Fine Arts at The University of Auckland.

**Zoe Milsom** is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Winchester, UK. Her doctoral thesis 'Interwar Headmistresses: Gender, Identity, Space-Place' examined the gendered professional identities of six headmistresses who were presidents of the Association of Headmistresses during the interwar period and who taught in London schools. Her research interests include the history of women's education, gender and women's history, creating self-identities and the theorization of gender, space and identity. She has published 'Going the Distance: Interwar Headmistresses' Performing Selves and Negotiating Transnational Spaces-Places' in the *History of Education Researcher* 89, May 2012, 46-54.

**Kay Morris Matthews** is Research Professor, Education and Social Sciences, at the Eastern Institute of Technology in New Zealand. She has published internationally in the areas of women and higher education and Māori girls' education including *In Their Own Right: Women and Higher Education in New Zealand before 1945* (2008). She is a past president of the Australian and New Zealand History of Education Society (ANZHEs), has represented ANZHEs on the International Standing Committee for History of Education and currently serves on the editorial boards of three international journals.

**Deirdre Raftery** is a historian of education. She is a faculty member at University College Dublin and a Life Member of Girton

College, Cambridge. Her research interests include nineteenth and early twentieth century education in Ireland and England; the contribution of religious orders to schooling internationally in nineteenth and twentieth centuries; image-based research and school architecture and the study of education spaces. She is the author of numerous books and edited collections. Her book *Emily Davies, Collected Letters, 1861–1875* (with A.B. Murphy, 2006) received prestigious MLA Approved Edition award. Her most recent book, edited jointly with David Crook, is *History of Education: Themes and Perspectives* (2013).

**Elizabeth M. Smyth** is Professor of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning and Vice Dean (Programs) at the School of Graduate Studies, University of Toronto, Canada. Her current funded research includes *Leading Sisters, Changing Times: Women Religious in English Canada in the Post Vatican II World* (Principal Investigator), *Academics: The Tenure Process in Social Science* (Collaborating Investigator) and *The State of the Consecrated Life in Contemporary Canada* (Collaborating Investigator). For her course of research on the history of women religious, she was awarded the George Edward Clerk Medal for outstanding contribution to Canadian religious history by the Canadian Catholic Historical Association and the Lifetime Achievement Award from the International History of Women Religious Network.

**Kay Whitehead** is Deputy Dean and Professor of Education in the School of Education at Flinders University, Australia. She has an extensive publication record in international refereed academic journals in the areas of feminist history, history of education and contemporary education. Kay is past president of the Australian and New Zealand History of Education Society, co-editor of *History of Education Review* and serves on the editorial boards of four international journals.



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# 1

## Introduction: Educational Lives and Networks

*Tanya Fitzgerald and Elizabeth M. Smyth*

There they go, our brothers who have been educated at public schools and universities, mounting those steps, passing in and out of those doors, ascending those pulpits, preaching, teaching, administering justice, practising medicine, transacting business, making money. It is a solemn sight always – a procession [...] For we have to ask ourselves here and now, do we wish to join the procession, or don't we? On what terms shall we join that procession? Above all, where is it leading us, the procession of educated men?<sup>1</sup>

This edited collection is a history of women educators who sought to, and in some cases did, join that procession, who wanted to name their own terms and who encouraged their female colleagues to join the procession with them. However, there is no suggestion by Virginia Woolf that women ought to slip silently into the procession. Rather she encouraged her sisters to consider being a very visible presence. The contributors to this collection take up Woolf's challenge and argue that educational qualifications as well as their work as educational professionals offered women a way to join the procession.

The chapters in this collection describe the experience of women educators in Australia, England and New Zealand as well women religious in Canada, Ireland and New Zealand,<sup>2</sup> analyzing how they were a visible presence in the procession of women professionals across the British Empire.<sup>3</sup> Connections and networks with colleagues in other locations offered women opportunities for professional renewal and the dissemination and exchange of new ideas – ideas that they used in their own professional work. Thus, the editors invited contributors from across a range of countries to examine the significance of women's connections

and networks as well as the influence of peers in advancing their own careers.

To better understand how women were able to respond to Woolf's challenge, each of the contributors considers how individual and communities of women negotiated and reconciled the tensions, contradictions and ambiguities inherent in their professional lives as educators. Serving as kindergarten, elementary and secondary school teachers, professors and administrators in private, state and religious schools as well as institutions of higher education, the biographical vignettes presented in this collection shed light on ways in which educated women built their careers, claimed a level of public intellectual authority and worked as agents of change. The profession of education provided these women with opportunities as well as the tools and space to take up leadership roles and forge national and transnational alliances with like-minded women. Thus, the contributors take a longer view of women's activism by systematically examining how they deployed their expertise and autonomy within their own professional sphere of influence. This permits a broad understanding of women's social and educational activism across several generations and across a range of different national settings. As the contributors highlight, women's social and intellectual networks provided a broader level of stimulus and support for their work and offered a way for women to extend their participation in the public sphere. Significantly, these networks facilitated an exchange of information and ideas, strengthened connections between women and stimulated the transmission of professional expertise.

The contributors chart the various forms of women's individual and collective actions as they evolved within multiple educational settings. In the main, the lives of the women presented illustrate the diversity of views, policies and strategies undertaken across a range of educational settings, religious groups as well as women's organizations and professional associations. At a more informal and local level, women established and nurtured connections and friendships that spanned institutional and transnational boundaries. It was through these networks that women were able to develop meaningful and significant relationships with their peers at a time when there were strong public expectations and anxieties about the role of women.<sup>4</sup> Connections and networks across transnational boundaries fostered the exchange of intellectual talent and ideas and were an integral component of building linkages within and across associations and organizations such as the International Federation of University Women.

Organizations and associations for women as well as personal networks stimulated a shared sense of identity and shared outlook, opportunity for companionship and a forum to share ideas.<sup>5</sup> An additional advantage was that membership and holding office projected women into the public sphere as influential individuals. While a level of visibility was crucial to any campaign to secure wider social and educational change, women in public office represented the interests of an alliance of women. Networks and connections through group membership were advantageous as women could draw on crucial levels of support and position themselves as authoritative figures.<sup>6</sup>

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, across Australia, Canada, England and New Zealand, teaching was one of the few professions in which women could achieve a measure of both status and authority.<sup>7</sup> It was a traditional expectation that women would serve as teachers in the nation's classrooms, and consequently women's entry into this profession was predominantly viewed as an acceptable interlude between a university education and marriage and motherhood. And while it appears that this presented limited scope for autonomous activity, roles for women beyond the classroom as headmistresses, union organizers and leaders of national associations presented opportunities to move beyond the intensely gendered occupational and hierarchical segregation they faced.<sup>8</sup> As the profiles presented in this collection demonstrate, as women took on leadership roles they encountered new difficulties as they sought to have their voices heard as meaningful and authoritative. Women educators who agitated for change were frequently cast as outsiders precisely because they threatened dominant expectations that marked their lives.<sup>9</sup> Case study examples such as Reta Oldham, Headmistress of Streatham Hill High School in London, England (Chapter 6); Henrietta Rodman, an educational reformer in New York City (Chapter 8); and Mary Gutteridge, an early childhood educator in Australia (Chapter 7), highlight what it meant to be a woman educator in the early to mid-twentieth century. Framing these women as agents emphasizes their individual consciousness and ability to act in and shape the historical context in which they lived through the positions they occupied.

This collection presents a series of case studies of women educators in the early to mid-twentieth century, a period marked by significant social, political and economic changes. Although these histories may appear to be presented in an orderly manner, each contributor is conscious of how fallible, fragmented and negotiated these lives were. The broad and inclusive approach to reading and writing women's lives that

has been adopted is deliberate as the authors wanted to focus on the importance of individual lives embedded in specific historical, social, cultural, economic and contexts. Accordingly, the collective interest of the contributors lies in bringing lesser-known figures more clearly into focus. Hence the contributors chart how women educators understood their professional work, how they fostered networks and friendships and how they exercised their authoritative voices in a century that was marked by wars, economic depression and the widening participation of women in civil society.

Across the various chapters, contributors draw on themes such as friendship, solidarity, collegiality and leadership to highlight ways in which women educators worked to influence social change. Importantly this collection offers perspectives from a range of countries, albeit all English-speaking, that share historical or geographical connections. For example, educated women in Australia, England, New Zealand and the United States were part of the diaspora of professional women whose careers are punctuated with accounts of travel and transnational connections and for whom connections with women across geographical boundaries were crucial to their own career biographies.<sup>10</sup> In addition, in the case of Canada, Ireland and New Zealand, connections across similar communities were integral to the shaping of women's religious identity. And while each of the chapters speaks to one or more of the central themes, each of the contributors adopts the lens of gender to complicate the intersectionality of gender, agency and professional work.

This collection traverses women's complex lives, with subjects having multiple identities. While one may be tempted to read the chapters as historical case studies of teachers, headmistresses and university women, gender, race and religion shaped how they experienced their roles as educators. Individual lives are used to illuminate the complexities and contradictions that women educators in the early twentieth century faced. Although each of their lives is marked by ambition, achievement and accomplishment, there is a marked reluctance to claim recognition of success. However, this was not unusual for women in this era as they frequently located their work as part of a collective endeavor within a wider professional network.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, women did not necessarily situate themselves as lone individuals but thought of themselves as members of a group. In part this was a survival strategy because women inherently understood that any individual and public presence would risk their being named and located as both different and inferior. Paradoxically, women were both empowered by the possibilities of

educational careers and at the same time limited by their status as a 'woman' and the historical moment in which they lived and the social positions they occupied.

In their own unique ways, each of the individual women highlighted in this collection undertook a variety of roles within the boundaries of her professional work and attempted to find new ways to agitate for change that was grounded in her own life experiences. Significantly, while each of the contributors recognizes the importance of the many ways in which women have exercised legitimate power and authority in educational settings, there is also recognition of the costs such efforts have exacted and the transitory nature of any progress that has been made. Collectively the authors acknowledge that their analysis of women's educational lives raises further questions about the nature of privilege and hierarchy. Although the profiles presented in this collection offer an account of achievement and accomplishment underscored by a climate of institutional and societal resentment, suspicion and distrust, nonetheless those women who did serve in leadership roles were overwhelmingly White women. While the gendered nature of leadership may have been challenged by the presence of Reta Oldham, Henrietta Rodman, Ann Strong or Mary Gutteridge, White power and privilege remained undisputed. This point is underscored further in the nuanced reading of the educational biography of Bessie (Wene) Te Wenerau Grace (Chapter 5).

The chapters of this collection remap our understanding of the complex interaction between gender, professional work and women's agency. Individually and collectively the narratives of women's professional lives and contributions point to alternate ways of thinking about the professional and personal contribution of educated women in the early to mid-twentieth century. Through a fine grained analysis of women's professional lives, networks and capacity to agitate for change, each of the contributors highlights ways in which educated women sought to carve out their own careers against a prevailing patriarchal backdrop.

Each of the chapters relates to the others. Each deals with women entering, or attempting to enter, an established world where they were confronted with a number of challenges to their presence as well as their authority. Frequently these fears were grounded in concerns that women posed a threat to men's jobs, roles and assumed superiority, including racial superiority. In some instances, women carved paths within highly centralized and patriarchal institutions, thereby creating a pathway for their female peers.



## Networks and friendships

Framing women educators as actors in their own lives emphasizes their ability to influence, shape and act in their world. While the organization of this collection is centered on the lives of individual women, the sense of self these women created as educators and activists as well as their individual achievements would not have been possible without the networks that sustained their activities. These networks, initially established via common educational, social or religious connections, stimulated a level of social and emotional support, independence, professional solidarity and opportunity for women to advance their own interests. Importantly, in these homophilous networks, women did not have to compete with men for resources, power or authority. These networks provided a level of collective power and the prospect of co-operation across local, national and transnational boundaries. For single women, as a number of chapters demonstrate, their networks provided a level of companionship, mutual support and community. In effect, their networks were lifelong substitutions for family life.<sup>12</sup> The everyday world of a number of women was deeply marked by the absence of men as the chapters by Fitzgerald (Chapter 2), Harford (Chapter 4) and Smyth (Chapter 3) illustrate. However, as Raftery emphasizes in Chapter 9, the everyday presence of women created significant opportunity for women to define their own contributions and develop their expertise.

An immediate advantage of women's networks is that they offered a form of professional unity that was centered on their common interests and concerns. Crucially, these professional networks brought women together as a collective group in which ideas could be formulated, debated and agreed. In this way, women could exercise local-level leadership as well as enhance their own skills of public debate and oratory – skills that could be transferred to other professional and public settings.<sup>13</sup> These networks stimulated a level of formidable energy as well as lively debate about the issues of the day.<sup>14</sup> In collectivizing their energies and abilities, networks of women were able to exercise effective reform strategies.

A second advantage was that these networks afforded opportunity for women to take up roles at local, national and transnational levels. Occupying offices such as Secretary or President was particularly useful as women learned to organize the membership around common concerns and advocate for the resolution of these issues. Importantly, these roles exposed women to a level of democratic citizenry and