

# “Speak softly, be tactful, and assist cheerfully...”

## Women beginning teaching in 1930s NSW

JO-ANNE REID, CHARLES STURT UNIVERSITY

SYLVIA MARTIN, UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND\*

*In New South Wales many young women completing their pupil-teacher training were drafted off to the hinterland to take charge of small bush schools on a salary of about £70. This appears substantial, but it should be noted that bush teachers had no residence provided and were required to board with a local family. The experiences of the governess teaching up country in Miles Franklin's My Brilliant Career are typical to a degree, although young women in the bush schools of the Department of Public Instruction were subjected to greater privations as they battled with unruly bush children, loneliness, isolation, low salary, lack of promotion opportunities, and often quite unsuitable accommodation (Kyle 1992: 475).*

Although she was discussing the preparation of female teachers in England and Australia during the nineteenth century, Noeline Kyle's description of the life of young women teaching in the Australian bush remained typical well into the twentieth century. In this paper we explore a range of representations of the experience of beginning teachers in NSW country towns during the Depression. We draw on a range of primary source material that parallels an important fictional account of a young female teacher's first year of service in the bush: Kylie Tennant's sharply-observed and satirical novel, *Tiburón* (1935). The experiences of Tennant's heroine, Jessica Daunt, are used to contextualise and counterpoint a set of letters received in late 1930 by Mr C.B. ('Pop') Newling, Principal of Armidale Teachers' College. These were written by the first cohort of graduates from the new college in response to Newling's request for them to write back to him about their first year of teaching. Their letters are in many ways remarkably frank although, given the fact they were written by ex-students at the request of their Principal (characterised later by one ex-student as a "benevolent despot"), it is sometimes necessary to read between the lines of what is actually written. The representations of their teaching lives in these letters reflect the 'ideal

teacher' they know he expects them to be. We draw also on the text of an interview with a retired NSW teacher and teacher educator, Kathleen Wall (a dynamic woman in her eighties who lives alone in a flat in Sydney's King's Cross), reflecting on school and teacher education during these years.

We use these materials to elaborate Kyle's claim that, while the traditional conservatism of women primary school teachers may be attributable to their training and lack of parity with male teachers in terms of salary and promotion, they were nonetheless able to influence and help shape their profession through political activity within it (Kyle 1992:472). The young women who wrote these letters were the highly successful products of a 'new' system of teacher education at Armidale, which aimed to produce expert practitioners, and were thus inevitably caught up in the way women were constructed within the teaching profession (Steedman 1992) – as Froebel's 'mothers made conscious'. Our reading of the letters of the pioneer students of 'Pop' Newling's establishment at Armidale suggests that when given their chance to be heard by the Principal of the new Teachers' College, and perhaps influence the conduct and curriculum of the college for their younger colleagues, several of the young women whose letters we read here are assertive and straightforward in their criticisms and suggestions for radical change. At the same time, however, they do this as exemplary subjects of their teacher education — both 'softly' and very 'tactfully' reminding the Principal of the College that teaching in the bush is something for which they felt they could have been a little better prepared.

### WOMEN BEGINNING TEACHING IN THE 1930S: 'FICTIONS' AND 'FACTS'

There are major differences between the fictional Miss Daunt and the actual young women who were the pioneer graduates of Armidale Teachers' College. In many ways, these are differences in the representation of experience that relate in part to the city/country divide. Tennant's Jessica Daunt came to the country from a 'cultured' middle-class professional family located in Sydney. She recalls them as she lies in the bedroom of the house to which she has been billeted in Tiburón:

She pictured Joan playing the piano and dad reading one of his boring books on economics. Or someone might have dropped in for a game of chess or billiards. They might all be talking, arguing, out at a concert or lecture, coming home to a late supper of coffee and little biscuits and more talk (Tennant 1935: 69).

In contrast, the young women and men who won scholarships to train at Armidale were country bred, and on the whole less privileged. For them the chance to leave the bush to study in Sydney was one of the incentives in becoming teachers. As C.B. Newling explains: "In the main, they came from schools on the north coast and northern tablelands ... Most of the entrants were disappointed, some were resentful, and none had ever heard of a Teachers' College in Armidale. Some made frantic efforts to change to Sydney College ... but all failed" (Newling, 1973:73-4). These students were mostly the children of farmers or tradespeople in country towns. After their teacher training,

their initial responses to their first postings to rural areas seem to have been less severe than Jessica's, probably because they were accustomed to the country and to country people. Nonetheless, they also experienced loneliness and isolation and a degree of shock at both the lack of teaching facilities and the deprivation of many of the children in remote rural areas.

There is one important similarity between Jessica Daunt and her contemporary Armidale graduates – their status as single women. We know very little of the home and community lives of the first year out teachers – what Marjorie Theobald (1990, 1996) calls “the ‘everyday world’ of women who taught”. However their letters to ‘Pop’ Newling are usefully contextualised by Tennant’s more elaborated (“fictional”) account of the life of a young woman beginning teaching in the 1930s. Theobald reminds us that the woman teacher throughout history has always taken “a daily journey” between the domestic sphere of the home and the public domain of the school (1996:177). We believe that there is a distinction to be made between the lives of the young women teachers we discuss here and the “lady teachers” whom Theobald (1990, 1996) depicts as ‘privileged’, in terms of their ability to make this daily journey between domestic and public space in a way usually reserved for males. The young single women we focus on here do not share this privilege: their domestic lives were not quite ‘private’ in the sense that Theobald develops. They were most often boarders or paying guests in the homes of less well-educated countrywomen whose children were among the pupils in the bush school. In this way Tennant’s depiction of Jessica Daunt’s everyday life, and the ways in which it dogged her footsteps between home and school provides a valuable supplement to the ‘letters to Pop’.

As a record of the public space in which these young women teachers worked, the neatly-penned cursive phrases of their letters detail the social, physical and emotional constructs and constraints on their professional lives, and these are our focus here. By reading Tennant’s ‘fiction’ in parallel with the explicitly-sought commentary in the letters, we are able to understand better the expression of tact and sense of service with which these young women teachers have been constructed through their training. In Bourdieu’s (1977) sense, this is the *habitus* and the bodily *hexis* they are required to perform ‘naturally’ as good teachers in the service of the state. It is this training, we argue, that limited their potential for political activity to the sort of ‘cheerful assistance’ that the letters provide.

As we indicate later, the only graduate teacher who felt able to comment on the impact of his domestic life (‘going home for lunch’) on his professional life is male (Mr Herbert J. Walsh of Whiporie). The blurring of the boundaries between the domestic and the public sphere of the country teacher is not nearly as problematic for him as it is for Jessica Daunt. Tennant shows that Miss Daunt, like the young Armidale women graduates, is not able to acknowledge her domestic problems within the public sphere. While a local School Inspector provided good counsel in both cases, Tennant’s Inspector arranges for Miss Daunt to be removed from her position because of the impropriety of

a breach of the boundary between the public and private spheres. Mr Walsh’s Inspector, in contrast, sends official approval for him to cross his boundaries with impunity. In what follows, we seek to explore the circumstances of these young women’s initial years of teaching in more detail. To this end we counterpose Tennant’s ambiguously fictional text with two sets of equally ambiguously ‘factual’ source material: the set of graduate ‘letters to Pop’ and an oral interview account from Kathleen Wall, who was a student in a country school during the early 1930s and subsequently became, herself, both a teacher and a teacher educator.

### DEPRESSING WORK

Kylie Tennant was just twenty years old when she married a schoolteacher and began the life she writes about in her first novel, *Tiburón*, serialised in *The Bulletin* prior to its publication in 1935. She was living in the central west of NSW with her husband, observing with compassion and great perception what she has since characterised as these “atrocious towns and their inhabitants”. She was reminded always that “she had had to struggle out of just such an environment as contented them, a respectability that was a malnutrition of the spirit” (Tennant 1972).

Tennant uses her character, Jessica Daunt, a new schoolteacher sent to Tiburón from Sydney on her first posting, to highlight the withering of enthusiasm, resistance and sensitivity to human suffering that the young author had found so atrocious. Jessica is certainly not dauntless, and in *Tiburón* we find her ultimate recourse to respectability and comfort disappointing and demeaning. It was precisely these characteristics of the small-minded, tight-laced, complacent citizenry of the town that her education and upbringing had led her to despise at the outset.

As a young teacher Miss Daunt is an outsider, one of the itinerants, like the young police constable. Tennant explains:

Schoolteachers were always subject to rumours. The town looked with suspicion on them. They were birds of passage and to them were attributed many and mysterious vices. For one thing the teachers symbolised “culture”; and Tiburón with its whole heart detested this sniffing, sneering culture which declared that what had been good enough for parents and grandparents was not good enough now (Tennant 1935: 242).

Jessica’s career in Tiburón is contrasted with that of ‘Jingo’ Barnes, a young male teacher who, in the year before her arrival, had also taught at the one-teacher school at Warning Hill. This year he is teaching at the town school, having ‘done his time’ in the small and under-resourced bush school, to which Jessica has just been appointed. Jessica and Jingo are the new generation of NSW teachers and they still bear the marks of their recent teacher education. They share a different, more liberal view of ‘culture’ from that of previous generations of teachers with whom the townsfolk are familiar. Jessica sees herself, on the basis of a brief acquaintance with political ideas at University, as having a modern and free-thinking approach to matters of social class.

However she is positioned quite differently from the other itinerants who pass through Tiburon at the start of the Great Depression: young policemen and the unemployed travellers seeking work to sustain their families, on the road. To this end, Tennant counterposes Jessica's youthful faith in the strength of collective human endeavour with the cynicism of Scorby, the policeman, and also with the ostentatious jingoism of her colleague Barnes. The policeman detests the hopeless poverty of the travellers and the ne'er-do-well fringe settlers. Barnes ignores the plight of these people, the underclasses of the Depression years, who are forced to eke out an existence in their campsites and mud huts on the edge of town. At the end of the novel Scorby leaves town for a new career that will take him away from the spiritual malnutrition of small town country life, Barnes remains for yet another year, and Jessica returns to the safety of the city, unable to break the bounds of a stuffy respectability that stifles passion. She is defeated on two fronts: by the narrow-mindedness of the community and by the hopelessness of her task as a teacher in a town like Tiburon.

"It isn't fair." Jessica's cheeks were red. "These children haven't the same chance."

The inspector glanced at his watch. [...]

"[...] You're right, Miss Daunt. But it isn't only plasticene and drawing materials the children want. They need rebuilding. Homes. Clothes. Living conditions. Tear down the bark humpies and the sackcloth tents and give them decent homes first. How much whooping cough have you had this year?" (Tennant 1935: 321).

### PREPARING 'NEW' TEACHERS

Tennant's life in the two country towns that became amalgamated as 'Tiburon' began in 1932. Her husband, and the fictional 'Miss Daunt', would have been among the student teachers who had been trained for the NSW teaching service by one of the two teachers' colleges in the state: at Sydney and, from 1928, in Armidale. Sydney Teachers' College was then under the Principalship of Alexander Mackie. It graduated about 100 new students each year, almost all of who began their careers in the small country schools that the NSW Education Department still classifies as 'hard to staff'. Mackie was the first Professor of Education at Sydney University as well as Principal of the Teachers' College. He was a philosopher and a thinker, who had taken up the principles of the New Education, with its emphasis on the natural sciences, Child Study and a belief in the natural goodness of children and their propensities for learning, in the right conditions and circumstances. As Kathleen Wall, one of his ex-student-teachers, a few years younger than Kylie Tennant, remembers:

He was the Principal when I was a student in '37, so I had the privilege of being lectured to by him. Very stimulating, [...] But at the time I did my Dip. Ed. I think that's the only lecturing he was doing then. Just the Dip. Ed. class. And he was noted — he sometimes used to infuriate students, especially the intermediate ones who liked to make nice

notes, because he never said 'this happened, then this happened then that' or 'education is this, this and this'. His lectures were a series of questions. And his lectures were more like questioning and debating and that sort of thing because he thought that's the way. That's the way he'd thought all those years since he came in 1906 — that he wanted teachers to be thinkers, you see. And it was not just subject matter, it was what they did, what they thought, what they wanted to do with the subject matter and teaching of methods. And he was a philosopher, that was his chief subject and I think he was a tremendous influence on teacher education (Interview with Kathleen Wall, Sydney 2001).

Alexander Mackie certainly valued 'culture', in both his students and the curriculum, and the College worked hard to provide its students with access to up-to-date literature, art, music and theatre, as part of their preparation for teaching. Mackie had been brought to Australia by Peter Board, the Director of Education at the start of the twentieth century, expressly to improve the quality of education, and teaching, in the colony. Mackie took up the challenge to ensure that Sydney Teachers' College functioned as place of 'education' for prospective teachers, rather than 'training', and the curriculum reflected this (Fletcher, 1995).

Mackie's influence at Sydney Teachers College, while strong, was certainly not uncontested. As Kathleen Wall remembers:

JR: It's interesting because Mackie and Board were very concerned about trying to upgrade the quality of primary teaching in particular and I think that's part of the ethos of Sydney Teachers College and it was his idea about 'educating', not 'training'.

KW: That's right. Educating and teaching philosophy. Teaching people to think, and encouraging them to develop and renew and not just stick to syllabuses. He was very inspirational and he had a great effect on, I think, the whole area of teacher education for the 20 years or more he was in it and thereafter...But it's hard to make any generalisations. We were all different, and as I say there were some who detested Mackie because of all the questions and the stirring and so on, when they wanted nice answers. But he never gave any answers. You had to do that, and so that we were all different, every student is different.

The sort of opposition to the rigorous free thinking espoused by Mackie is epitomised in Tiburon by the figure of the Headmaster of Tiburon School, Mr Carfrae, whose conservatism is reflected in the following description of him, given to Jessica Daunt by the Rector's wife, Polly:

"No-Sunday-sport," Polly broke in; "Every-word-of-the-Bible-is-true-and-you're-damned-if-you-say-it-isn't. The-wife-must-obey-her-lord-and-master. Children-must-fear-their-parents." She slowed down. "He talks about culture and grinds the kids for examinations. They are the be-all and end-all. He'll be an inspector one day or burst in the attempt" (Tennant 1935: 61).

Jessica had arrived in town fresh from her teacher education and eager to do well, even though the kindly Rector, Bill Sorrell, sounds a note of warning to the reader when he first encounters the new recruit:

She stood there confidently, her head tilted a little to one side. He felt suddenly angry with the department that they had sent her. "When will they realise", he thought, "that they can't send these young men and women away from their homes to towns and schools where they fall into trouble from sheer loneliness?" (Tennant 1935: 55).

Miss Daunt began with enthusiasm, determined to educate and enlighten her charges and enhance the lives of their families:

The school had changed a lot since her arrival. The walls had been kalsomined green and cream, and, where possible, she had covered them with gay pictures bought with her own money. Paul had helped her scrub the desks and paint them a dark green. The blackboard easels were lacquered scarlet, and Paul was making her a sand tray. The dark green table had a bright print cover and a flower case. There were geraniums in scarlet pots by the windows, and the garden almost was a garden with three rose bushes out in flower and the honeysuckle sweetening the verandah (Tennant 1935: 110).

Her efforts were rewarded by the children's friendship and support, though we hear little of their learning apart from the disastrous display of singing that reduced the Inspector to paroxysms of laughter and provoked Jessica to complain to him about the poor support provided by the Department. As the Inspector who visited her classroom at the end of her first year of teaching noted, Jessica Daunt was a 'good teacher'. The singing demonstration she had organised for him showed she had learnt the value and importance of music for raising the self-esteem of the pupils in her little school. Like Jingo Barnes, she saw her mission as a teacher as one of bringing the benefits of light and culture to the populace. She had also taken up the lessons of the College about the value of Nature Study, for instance:

Miss Daunt looked around at her efforts in red and green, the pitiful little makeshift of a curtain hiding the fireplace, and the sunflowers in cheap vases (she had thrown out the jam jars), and her heart rebelled sullenly. The things she wanted! How could she teach these children without a piano? She wanted drawing material and chalks and crayons and more pencils. She was tired of buying paint and nails, friezes and vases and kalsomine out of her infinitesimal salary. [...] She wanted the children to have an aquarium, but so far there was only a jam-jar full of cheerfully wriggling tadpoles (Tennant 1935: 110-11).

Jessica attributed her failure to achieve the ideals to which she aspired in teaching to the conditions of both the school and the children. Her efforts seemed poor in comparison to the ideals she had developed from her lectures and textbooks at college. They stated quite clearly the sorts of teaching aids that were desirable:

Every school should possess an aquarium; five plates of glass and the application of gummed paper are the means of providing a simple vessel that will hold water for a considerable time. The aquarium should be filled with stream or pond water and stocked with pond life peculiar to the locality; at frequent intervals it should be replenished from the same source. Aquatic plants may be made to grow in the vessel without difficulty, being kept in position at the outset, by small pieces of stone laid on them. Water plants, pond insects, snails and even small fish may be used to stock an aquarium (Elijah 1924: 425-6).

The 'culture' Tiburon's townsfolk despised comprised just this sort of novelty. It was Jessica's determination as a 'good teacher' to bring her cultivating practices to the children in her charge, in fact, which initiated her relationship with the intelligent and poetic book-lover, Paul White. And it was this that led to her to leave Tiburon after one year, reduced from the undaunted free thinker who had arrived in the town full of hope and enthusiasm, to a young woman glad to return to the safety of the city. Although not an itinerant, Paul was one of the socially outcast fringe-dwellers of Tiburon because of his family's poverty, and the upright citizens of the town whispered and gossiped about Jessica's private life. One of the parents, Mrs Mulver, even wrote to the headmaster to complain of Miss Daunt's improper actions in going out walking with Paul White. Her motives, as Tennant represents them, are a complex resentment of the classed 'culture' that state education was aiming to provide:

Miss Daunt didn't have to live in a bag hut or be thankful for second-hand clothes. She didn't have to worry about money and, if she lost her job, her family would very probably find her another. It was sinful that some people shouldn't have anything to worry about. With the charitable intention of providing Jessica with something at least in the worry line, she bought a bottle of ink and painfully expended thought and time composing the epistle to "Mr. Carfrae, Head School-techer, Tiburon."

"An' Ah 'ope that fixes y', ma ledy," she breathed triumphantly. 'That'll teach y' ta sneer th' other side a ya face'" (Tennant 1935: 237).

Tennant uses the Inspector, quite legitimately, to argue that it is the circumstances in which these bush children are being reared rather than the failure of the Department that leads to their lack of learning and 'cultivation'; these effects of rural poverty are a major theme of her novel. Neither of the NSW Teachers' Colleges, however, informed as they were by the new sciences of psychology and measurement, could officially share this view of the pointlessness of their work. Preparing good teachers for NSW schools was their major function — and indeed ensuring a supply of teachers for *rural* schools was part of the rationale for the founding of the Armidale Teachers' College in 1928.

#### TEACHER EDUCATION IN THE COUNTRY

Alexander Mackie's radical philosophies had grown less attractive to the bureaucracy as Directors changed and the NSW Department of Public Instruction grew larger and

responsible for more and more schools, many of them located at large distances from Sydney. Successive Directors were less determined to ensure the intellectual quality of NSW teachers, and more concerned that they should be well skilled in curriculum delivery. New Teachers' Colleges were set up (first in Armidale in 1928 and later in other regional centres such as Bathurst, Newcastle and Wagga). The distinction between Armidale and Sydney Teachers' Colleges was expressly marked in terms of the practical nature of the new College curriculum. As far as the Department was concerned, teachers were employed to ensure an equitable delivery of the Department's 'cultivating' curriculum throughout the state, regardless of the location of the school.

C.B. Newling, the Principal appointed to the College at Armidale, set out his educational philosophy thus:

From the start I promised myself that A.T.C. would be neither a copy nor a caricature of any other college ... I committed myself to a policy of putting pedagogy on a pedestal; in other words, I gave equal weight to knowing what to teach and to knowing how to teach. I was convinced that a teachers' college ought to try to produce good practitioners as well as good scholars (Newling 1973: 72).

In this way, Newling set himself apart from Mackie's ideals, both following the Department's guidelines and shrewdly gearing his curriculum to cater for students whose class background was less privileged and 'cultured' than their city counterparts and who would be more likely to agree to teach in rural areas. The problem with the graduates of Sydney Teachers' College was that "the majority plumped for city schools and bright lights":

Often it was difficult to persuade ex-students to accept posts in country towns and rural areas. One of the arguments for remaining in the metropolis was a psychological yearning for its cultural amenities not available in the country (Newling 1973: 67).

The students at Armidale Teachers' College were part of the new 'professionalisation' of the teacher that Terri Seddon (1988) identifies as occurring in the late 1920s in New South Wales. Under the assumption that "individuals had inherent characteristics which could be shaped, but not created in training", the NSW Director of Education indicated his requirements of the teacher who was to emerge from the new College (NSW Department of Education, 1928: 62-3):

The College would influence speech, manners, ideals, motives and intellectual equipment. English and the skilful use of language, and Nature Study, 'the second cultural course', were particularly important areas (Seddon 1988: 16).

#### LETTERS TO 'POP': YOUNG TEACHERS' ACCOUNTS

Tennant's fictional 'Miss Daunt' began teaching at roughly the same age as, and in similar circumstances to, the group of 33 young women who graduated as teachers from Armidale Teachers' College in 1929 and took up appointments in rural schools around NSW in 1930. In October of that year, C.B. 'Pop' Newling, wrote to each of the pioneer graduating class (which also included 28 young men), asking them to reflect upon their first year of teaching and to provide some feedback to the college on the quality of their preparation. His letter asked for the students to comment on the following issues:

- 1) What College subjects you found most helpful
- 2) The subjects you found most difficult to handle
- 3) Any improvements on the College course that might be made with profit to the students (Newling 1930).

Over the next two months, 41 of these new teachers (26 female, and 15 male) replied, sharing their triumphs and their failures, and offering advice for the education of future student teachers. They were an interesting group of young people, whose enthusiasm and delight in teaching does not seem to have waned, as Jessica's did, during their first year of teaching. We do not know, of course, the feelings of those who did not respond, but it is clear that in replying to their former Principal, most of these young people did attempt to be as 'frank' as they were able:

I like teaching, Mr Newling. Of course at times I get angry and annoyed but I am trying to develop a sympathetic outlook towards the children (Miss Mona Evans, Lismore).

The comprehensive practical nature of the Armidale training is borne out in many of the letters, such as this one from a teacher at South Lismore:

Several city-trained teachers have envied me the thorough course of training I received and they have told me that they had never seen a Programme of Lessons or a Lesson Register, nor had they attempted to construct a time-table until they commenced teaching! (Miss Beatrice Glasson, Sth Lismore).

Another young woman took the 'practical' nature of her teaching further, tailoring it to suit the environment she was sent to:

I can frankly say my College Course was indeed a thorough and practical one. Wallsend as you may or may not know has a large majority of miners in its district and I have found great practical value in building up an atmosphere – your sage advice – along the concrete value of coal (Miss Nora Eckert, Wallsend).

Their college generally considered the pioneer students to be good teachers. In the table below, we detail the marks that the first graduating class received in two of their College subjects, English I and II, and their Teaching mark at the end of their first year.

**Figure 1. Marks in English I, II and Teaching (end 1928)**

English I			English II			Teaching		
Mark	Female	Male	Mark	Female	Male	Mark	Female	Male
80+	3	0	80+	1	0	A+	0	0
75+	6	1	75+	2	0	A	2	0
70+	7	2	70+	2	0	A-	6	4
65+	0	3	65+	7	1	B+	15	4
60+	1	2	60+	5	3	B	2	4
55+	4	4	55+	6	2	B-	0	2
50+	3	1	50+	1	6	C+	0	0
40+	0	1	40+	1	3	C	0	0
No Record	2	1	No Record	2	0	No Record	0	1

From the letters, we can tell that some of these students improved their teaching mark by the time they graduated, and several noted that they had delayed replying to Mr Newling until after their first inspection. They were keen to report the teaching mark the Inspector had awarded them after assessing their work in the school.

It is clear from Figure 1 that several female students scored higher marks in all areas than their male peers, with twice as many women as men gaining A or A- in teaching. A possible reason for this discrepancy is suggested in the work of Noeline Kyle:

In the first decades of the twentieth century the department experienced great difficulty in attracting suitable male candidates to positions in small, remote bush schools... The difficulty experienced by the department in attracting male applicants to teaching in the first instance and then culling out 'suitable' men for the job was solved with characteristic unimaginative policy. Until the 1970s all male applicants to teacher education scholarships in New South Wales were accepted on an aggregate up to 60 points lower than for women (Kyle 1988: 31).

Further, Nelson (1989) claims that over 80% of female students gaining their matriculation in New South Wales country high schools from 1918 to 1938 became teachers: "The main function of government country high schools was to provide teachers for government primary schools" (Nelson 1989: 53). He explains:

The primary teachers came overwhelmingly from the families of shop owners, tradesmen, hairdressers, small farmers, clerks, postal workers, soldiers, miners and semi-skilled workers. Few children of unskilled labourers reached the top of Australian high schools, but if they did there was a strong chance that they would become teachers (Nelson 1989: 53).

More is revealed from an analysis of their letters. Who were these young women and men, and in what ways were they like and unlike the young Jessica Daunt? For one thing, like Jessica, some of these young people were faced with the difficulty of teaching a wide age range of under-privileged children in their small school. Unlike the teacher in Tiburon, and many other young women sent to one-teacher schools in rural NSW, those among the pioneer group from Armidale sent to one-teacher schools were all male:

Now, for instance, in my first class I have nine children, the ages ranging from five to ten. Two of them, one nine and one ten, began school for the first time only a couple of months ago. They come four and a half miles on horseback. I have found it most difficult to establish a clear understanding of the principles of reading with these children (Mr J. W. Thompson, Green Pigeon, via Kyogle).

For many of the teachers, male and female, school accommodation, even in larger schools, left something to be desired:

The subject that I find most difficult to teach is writing. This is probably due to the fact that the children are making their first attempt in pen, also to the inconvenience of working in a shed (Miss D. Pearce, Ballina).

For those graduates who were appointed to larger schools in the city, there were also difficulties to be faced, often due to overcrowded classes:

Another difficulty which I have had to meet is that for the first five months I taught in a corridor. Since June I teach part time in a room. At present I have 72 on roll and when in the corridor the children sit 3 in each desk while 12 children have no desks at all. It is while in the corridor that I have most difficulty in teaching for apart from the accommodation we are continually being interrupted, however I find that some of the difficulty is overcome by using teaching aids such as reading and number cards (Miss Noel Campbell, Granville).

One young teacher from Armidale Teachers' College sent to the city (Bondi) found difficulty with the teaching of Nature Study in this environment, finding that even snails were in short supply in city streets. As the breakdown of responses to Newling's questions (see Appendix) clearly illustrates, the students found that Nature Study was the most useful subject taught at College, with over half of them mentioning it in their letters. Like Jessica, they were keen to build on the children's interest in the living and natural things in their environment, although one new teacher explained how he was not quite teaching by 'College Principles':

Now the subject which has caused me trouble – Nature Study... I have found that the best way to teach Nature Study is from actual nature itself. I select my special topics to suit the occasion. At present the tanks have some mosquito larvae in them – so the life history of the insect follows. An aphid plague gave rise to a chat on those pests and so on. There is always something showing up and I am never "stumped" (Mr A.R. Bain, East Kempsey).

Kathleen Wall remembers the Nature Study she learnt as a child in a country school:

Growing seeds is the thing that sticks in most peoples' minds, you know, you've got the bits of blotting paper and you put wheat seeds on and they grow. Or you got a jar, put blotting paper around it and soil in the middle, wet it and then between the blotting paper and the jar you sowed bean seeds and you could watch them grow. That's my main memory but that's trivialising it. It depends on who was teaching it. It was compulsory but [...] it wasn't a very important subject at school — it wasn't examined and the teachers were a bit laid back and relaxed about it and it very much depended on the teacher. If you got the ones who really cared about plants and the environment (we didn't use the word 'environment' at all) then those children never got insights about "how a thistle really works" to understand the syllabus on a shall we say 'scientific basis' in primary school. But [they got] to specialise in outdoor work — getting children out to grow plants in the garden and out into the bush, and keeping animals and that sort of thing (Interview with Kathleen Wall, Sydney, 2001).

Nature Study and Music seem, out of all the subjects, to have been the ones that were able to break down the barrier between teacher and pupil and make even the most difficult children co-operate:

Music has a wonderful power breaking down the wild habits of some of the urchins who have come off the street... Nature Study topics will lead the most self-conscious child to talk and forget himself (Miss Jean Johnson, Kyogle).

One of the young women graduates was sent to the remote town of Pallamallawa. This was four and half hours on the train from Inverell "with nothing to see but sand and prickly pear", then a journey in an old truck "with no windscreen, and with springs projecting from the seat in various places". This letter is one of the few in which we are told where the teacher was accommodated, in this case, the hotel. The headmaster of Pallamallawa school, whose name, "Mr Batchelor", has such a ring of the fictional about it that it seems he should have been a character in Tiburon, boarded there too. Nature Study became a wonderful forum for mutual learning in this school as the children, who are described as "retards ... from very poor homes", probably many of them Aboriginal ("our school is almost a 'League of Nations'"), begin to teach their new teacher:

For all their dullness I like the children. They are teaching me, and each other — I know it should be one another — all the different trees, by bringing leaves and bark and making a chart. They are very keen on that. Of course, I don't know the trees here yet except one or two (Miss Ethel MacDonald, Pallamallawa).

The bush itself was a resource that many teachers in bush schools were able to use effectively. As Nelson (1989: 104) writes, "unlike the later environmental movement, 'nature study' included country people: it did not seem to be imposed on them by soft-handed city people who presumed moral superiority."

There was little evidence in the letters to Mr Newling of the suspicion and distrust that Jessica Daunt experienced as a new teacher in a country town. This may have been because the young women teachers were not alone in their schools, and the Armidale graduates were not middle-class city dwellers, whereas Jessica was criticised by the odious Mrs Mulver for "condescending to the lower classes" with "that haw haw voice uv 'ers" (p.88). Perhaps the fact that Armidale Teachers' College students were not as rigorously trained to be 'cultured' intellectuals also helped the teachers become more accepted by the townsfolk. Perhaps, on the other hand, they were simply too polite to complain to their Principal about such matters. As noted earlier though, one young man in a one-teacher school does seem to have been the victim of the phenomenon that Tennant's Inspector called "the anonymous letter-writer we have always with us" (Tennant 1935: 319).

Herbert Walsh was posted to Whiporie School where he found himself in a community that was less than welcoming:

I had a little trouble with one of the parents over immorality. However everything he was talking about occurred last year and the four people concerned have all left school. Fortunately he has let the matter drop.

I have about one hundred yards to go home from school. However someone, a person not at all associated with the school, complained about my going home for lunch. I remained at school for about a fortnight during lunch time while I obtained permission from the local inspector to lunch at home (Mr Herbert J. Walsh, Whiporie).

The local Inspector was a figure of support for this young man, as he was for Jessica Daunt, even though it took him a fortnight to respond to Mr Walsh's request. Mr Walsh was able to enlist his employer in solving this problem of the boundaries between his domestic and public lives, in ways that Miss Daunt did not see open to her, and which is not evident in any of the letters from female graduates. However without the professional support they had experienced at College, many of the teachers found that their first year out was quite stressful. Several of the women did comment on their feelings in this regard:

Oh Goodness! I shall never forget the first couple of weeks. I thought I would never be able to teach as long as I lived, and often despaired at the idea of that feeling vanishing (Miss Muriel Fahey, Artarmon).

During the first few weeks I felt hopelessly at sea... (Miss B.L. Gallagher, Casino).

Despite our last month of training at A.T.C. for the first few weeks I felt "all at sea", and I assure you in my case the advice of a supervisor was sadly missed (Miss Jessie McDonald, Ross Hill).

The young men who were feeling inadequate tended to blame inadequacies in their training rather than themselves:

I was quite pleased to receive your communication, as I have met with many difficulties since I left college. Perhaps some of these troubles could have been avoided if I had carried out, in the first place, certain things which were taught in College. However, experience has proved to me that the College course has been insufficient in its training in certain aspects of Education (Mr N. Maurer, Inverell).

Several of the teachers noted in their letters that they felt the local Demonstration School did not adequately represent the sort of school to which they were likely to be sent:

I should suggest therefore that instead of dealing with subjects as they appeal to Practice School children, some time should be taken with subjects as they would appeal to a school - say a backward school, for there are very many in this class (Mr J. W. Thompson, Green Pigeon, via Kyogle).

I really think that the time spent in the schools, other than the demonstration school was of more value to me, because there I had to face some of the difficulties which I find here... May I suggest that those doing Infants' work be instructed and taught games and exercises especially suitable where there is not a piano (Miss Dulcie Gray, Muswellbrook).

Miss Gray's tactful phrasing ("I really think.."; "May I suggest..") contrasts with the authoritative and direct terminology employed by Mr Thompson. Each characterises well the qualities of the strong and assertive 'good teacher' who is male, and the soft and cheerful female teacher figure.

### GENDER TROUBLE

The personal and embodied qualities of cultured masculinity and femininity that teachers were employed to model to their pupils were sometimes the source of professional concern to the young graduates, and sometimes the actions of Inspectors were a cause of frustration for the young teacher. This was particularly the case if he resorted to the normative constructs of gender in allocating workload, as in the case of the young Armidale graduate appointed to teach at Dorrigo in 1930. Miss Clancy had been awarded an A classification at the College, and her letter (written one year later than the others, in 1932) is the only instance we found of outright dissatisfaction with teaching:

To tell the truth, Mr Newling, I have a hearty dislike for teaching this year, and if I don't find conditions improved by Christmas, I intend to resign. I am in charge of a very backward sixth class and I find the job too big. For the past six weeks a member of the staff has been ill so that I have also had 5th class. On top of this, the Inspector (Mr Mann) is forcing me to teach Needlework up to the leaving, and, as I haven't had the course myself, I find it a well nigh impossible task. I certainly feel that I can't do justice to my own class when I have the sewing to think of (Miss Bessie Clancy, Dorrigo).

On the whole, the young women graduates of Armidale Teachers' College tried to make the best of the conditions to which they were subjected, even though they sometimes found the restraints imposed upon their gender frustrating. Several commented (tactfully, as they had been taught) on the problems of the gendered pre-service curriculum at Armidale. Many, on appointment, were expected to teach Manual Work whereas women were not offered this at College, and studied Needlework instead:

The subject which caused me most difficulty was manual work, on first coming here I had to teach manual work to a 5A class and as I had absolutely no knowledge of the subject, my first lesson was a failure. However, it served to show me how much I needed to learn about it. With the aid of a teacher from the Super-primary department I have now learned a great deal about Manual Training. In fact, it is my favourite subject. It has occurred to me since that the two years devoted to Needle work could profitably be shared with Manual work (Miss Coral King, Bondi).

Your talks on personal example, how to deal with parents, the psychology of the child mind and how to fill in the necessary forms, have proved very helpful...The thing for which I have so far found no use is the sewing course. This school has a sewing mistress and an assistant sewing mistress (Miss Joyce Watt, Bathurst).

It is hardly necessary to point out that none of the male teachers were asked to teach Needlework.

Although the women pioneer graduates averaged higher marks than their male counterparts, many of them, without special training or interest, were sent to teach in the lower-status Infants' Departments, whereas none of the men was. The simple fact that they were female was understood to make them admirably suited for work with infants. Carolyn Steedman traces "the notion of teaching as a kind of mothering" and an educational belief in "the benefits to children of maternal attitudes" to Friederich Froebel, the founder of the kindergarten movement in the nineteenth century (Steedman 1992: 179). She argues that this idea has persisted well into the twentieth century, as late as the '60s and '70s, in the influential work of Donald Winnicott, among others (Steedman 1992: 186). In 1929 in Armidale, it seems to have been an underlying factor in deciding where the new teachers were to be posted. Miss Vida Waters, the author of the advice to prospective teachers from which the title of this paper was taken, expressed her feelings when she was sent to an Infants' School even though her marks show that she was one of the top students. She handled the situation, however, with the tact she had been taught to foster:

When I received my appointment, it was very disappointing to find I had to fill a vacancy in the Infants' Department... Nevertheless, I soon began to feel my way and it was really surprising how much help I found in my college training (Miss Vida Waters, Daceyville).



The ideal female teacher described by Margaret MacMillan in 1908 “has hovered for a century now”, says Steedman, “in the timeless present tense”:

They move with wonderful grace. Their voices are low, penetrating, musical...Their dress is beautiful and simple, and nothing is so remarkable as their power – except their gentleness (quoted in Steedman 1992: 190).

As we have illustrated, the qualities of gentleness, and ‘culture’ were highly prized among female teachers. Nelson (1989: 137) notes: “The school teacher and the station master both provided a service wanted by country people; but unlike the station master the teacher came as a representative of a culture which was thought to be finer”. What marked the ‘gentility’ of the school mistress most of all was the ‘softness’ and culture of her voice. When Sydney Teachers’ College began evaluating the oral expression of its student teachers in 1916, Miss E. Mallarky, Lecturer in English, viewed the results as highly successful:

The introduction of an oral test as complementary to the written, proved an interesting and valuable innovation. The results of the test served to bring out plainly the superiority of the women over the men students in the matter of care and clearness of utterance. With respect to the command of vocabulary they are about equal and both show in this a marked deficiency (Mallarky 1916).

She noted, in addition, that the value of the test also lay in “arousing consciousness in the students of the importance of good speech” (Mallarky 1916). This attention to student teachers’ speech and elocution continued into the English program at Armidale. Not all of the first graduate teachers found their College’s exhortation to “speak softly” an easy injunction to follow, though in characteristic fashion the young women blamed themselves for their perceived failings:

My biggest failure in teaching is my voice. I speak too loudly and rather abrupt. I don’t seem to be able to cultivate that soft voice. I seem to bring my drill voice into school. If I am not speaking loudly I feel as if I am “loafing” (Miss Lorraine Foot, Mayfield East).

## CONCLUSION

The optimism with which young women teachers began their careers in small rural communities in early twentieth-century NSW remains with us as testament to their courage and their conscientiousness. In many cases, these careers remained difficult and were often short. One of the most poignant comments we came across in the letters was made by a female pioneer graduate who, in typical fashion, tried cheerfully to overcome the fears and difficulties that she had faced in her first year of teaching. Writing in November 1930, she told Mr Newling:

I am glad I am not commencing next year as I remember the horrible feeling I had when I arrived here. However I had met another lady teacher the day before and it was not so bad after all. I am really glad that I am a teacher (Miss Dulcie Gray, Muswellbrook).

The first issue for 1931 of *Attica*, the Armidale Teachers’ College magazine, contained Miss Dulcie Gray’s obituary.

It is important to note that the 1930s Depression brought with it a virtual cessation of employment in Department schools for new teachers. These first Armidale graduates, responding to Mr Newling at the end of their first year of teaching, were the last for several years to automatically receive a posting at the end of their training. And these young women were to find, a year or so later, when they had refined their teaching skills through hard work and experience, that they faced yet another challenge. All of these young women, barely out of their teens, who left Armidale Teachers’ College full of hope, and trepidation, to become teachers in rural New South Wales in 1930, had joined the profession just ahead of the 1932 Married Women (Lecturers and Teachers) Act. In the years until it was repealed (in 1947), this Act successfully limited the numbers of women teachers in New South Wales. As Kyle reports:

Its impact was most destructive in the primary division where women were more numerous and an overall effect of the act was to convince young women that teaching was not offered to them as a lifetime career. Yet these women teachers were fulfilling the ‘teacher as mother’ role ascribed to them by the continuing rhetoric of educational officialdom (Kyle 1988: 31).

The fictional Jessica Daunt crept back to the city after one year of teaching, marrying the suitor she had previously rejected, worn down by the prejudices of the inhabitants of Tiburon and by those of her middle-class upbringing. Kathleen Wall remained single and went on to become a respected and prominent teacher and teacher educator. Apart from the early death of Dulcie Gray, we have not as yet been able to discover what happened to many of the Armidale Teachers’ College pioneer graduates. We do know that the Mr Walsh, who was criticized for going home for lunch at Whiporie Public School, later became Teacher-in-Charge at a school in Northern New South Wales. By the ‘50s and ‘60s, the women of the pioneer group who responded to invitations to Armidale Teachers’ College reunions had mostly left the profession and spoke of their children and grandchildren.

As Steedman notes (1992: 55): “To write any history of women in classrooms means an encounter with [institutional] history, an encounter in which the first priority must be to shift the perspective, see the prisonhouse in the light of history and politics, whose artifact it is”. The letters sent to ‘Pop’ Newling in 1931 indicated that these young women took their profession and its responsibilities just as seriously as their male counterparts, and certainly there is no suggestion in them that these young women were simply

marking time until they could be married. They were trained to be conservative, and the letters we have presented here show that most of them learned their lessons well. The young women graduate primary school teachers responding to their ex-Principal's request for advice on the nature and quality of their professional training, were, it seems, able to influence and help shape teacher education at Armidale in only limited ways. Their responses to Mr Newling indicate these new teachers to be both optimistic and creative in facing and naming the challenges they encountered as beginning teachers and women in NSW country schools. Yet we have been unable to detect any subsequent change in the College curriculum and organisation that could be attributable to their 'soft, tactful and cheerful' assistance.

#### NOTES

\* This work has been conducted with the assistance of ARC funding awarded to Bill Green, Jo-Anne Reid and Phil Cormack at CSU and UniSA.

#### REFERENCES

- Bourdieu, P. 1977, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Trans. R. Nice), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Elijah, J.W. 1924, *The Principles and Technique of Teaching in Elementary Schools*, Whitcombe & Tombs Limited, Melbourne.
- Fletcher, B. 1995, 'Shaping the College, 1906-1920', in G. Boardman et al., *Sydney Teachers College: A History 1906-1981*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, pp. 28-57.
- Kyle, N.J. 1988, 'Woman's "natural mission" but men's real domain: the masculinisation of the state elementary teaching service in New South Wales', in S. Taylor and M. Henry (Eds.), *Battlers and Bluestockings: Women's Place in Australian Education*, ACER, Canberra.
- Kyle, N.J. 1992, "Can You Do as You're Told?" The Nineteenth-Century Preparation of a Female Teacher in England and Australia', *Comparative Education Review*, November, pp. 467-486.
- Mallarky, E. 1916, 'Comments on Work in English'. Handwritten report to the Principal of Sydney Teachers' College, May 3, University of Sydney Archives.
- Nelson, H. 1989, *With Its Hat About Its Ears: Recollections of the Bush School*, Australian Broadcasting Commission, Crow's Nest.
- Newling, C.B. 1930, Circular Letter to 1929 Graduates, Armidale Teachers' College Archives (including 41 letters in response).
- Newling, C. B. 1973, *The Long Day Wanes*, L.F. Keller, Sydney.
- Seddon, T. 1988, 'Teachers as Workers, the State as Employer: Restructuring the work relationship, 1929-1932', *Curriculum Perspectives*, Vol.8, No. 1, pp. 12-20.
- Steedman, C. 1992, "'The Mother Made Conscious': the historical development of a primary school pedagogy", in C. Steedman, *Past Tenses: Essays on writing, autobiography and history*, Rivers Oram Press, London. This is a shortened version of the piece originally published under the same title in *History Workshop*, 20 (Autumn 1985).
- Steedman, C. 1992, 'Prisonhouses', in C. Steedman, *Past Tenses: Essays on writing, autobiography and history*, River Oram Press, London. This is an abridged version of the article published as 'Prisonhouses' in *Feminist Review* (Summer, 1985).
- Tennant, K. 1935/1981, *Tiburon*, Sirius Quality Paperbacks, Angus & Robertson, Sydney'
- Tennant, K. 1972/1981, 'Introduction', *Tiburon*, Sirius Quality Paperbacks, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.
- Theobald, M. 1990, 'The everyday world of women who taught', *History of Education Review*, Vol. 19, No. 9.
- Theobald, M. 1996, *Knowing Women: Origins of women's education in nineteenth century Australia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Wall, K. 2000, 'Reflections on a Career in Teacher Education', Unpublished transcript of interview with J. Reid, Sydney, June.

## APPENDIX

## What did the teachers say? Responses to Mr Newling's letter

## 1) MOST HELPFUL COLLEGE SUBJECTS

Nature Study	22
Art	16
Music	15
Handwork	7
History	6
Phonetics	6
Geography	6
Special method	5
General method	5
PT	5
Manual Training	4
Spelling	3
English	3
Story telling	2
Arithmetic	2
writing	2
Blackboard writing & presentation	2
Reading	1
Dictation	1
Programming/timetabling	1
Psychology	1

## 2) SUBJECTS MOST DIFFICULT TO HANDLE

Reading	8
Composition	6
Arithmetic	5
Music	5
History	4
Civics	3
Oral composition	3
Grammar	2
Geography	2
Hygiene	2
Singing	1
Long division	1
Spelling	1
Dictation	1
Manual work	1
Cursive writing	1
Physical Culture	1
Nature Study	1
Art	1

## 3) IMPROVEMENTS RECOMMENDED

Female teachers need to learn how to teach manual work	(F) (F) (F)
Record keeping	(M) (F)
Teaching aids	(F) (M)
More arithmetic	(F) (M)
Scheme for class note books	(M)
Class log book	(M)
Increase time for infant school training	(F)
Need activities suitable for schools where there is no piano	(F)
More English/Grammar	(M)
More attention to middle primary geography	(F)
Specialisation after first 3 months as Infants teachers did not have enough practical experience	(F)
All would-be teachers ought to be advised as to the usefulness of an aquarium in a classroom	(F)
Practice teaching more than one class	(F)

## OTHER DIFFICULTIES

Itinerant children	2
Programming	2
Control of class	2
Getting children to talk	1
Keeping lower division children occupied	1
Finding appropriate reading material	1