Knowing Women: Origins of Women's Education in Nineteenth-Century Australia.


$90.00 cloth. $34.95 paper.

Knowing Women brings together the fruits of Marjorie Theobald's important body of feminist revisionist research on nineteenth century history of education in Australia. As a history of education in the nineteenth century, this book adds to and takes issue with existing accounts of what was happening, what mattered, who should be written about, what meanings we might take from the records. It also directly and indirectly engages with some contemporary debates in feminist theory about how we understand woman as a subject, and some contemporary debates in education about what form of educational reform is in the interests of women.

In terms of the historical story offered in this volume, Theobald weaves an account which is nicely iconoclastic. The late nineteenth century development of the large 'academic' schools which are prestigious today, Theobald argues, has been too readily accepted as a story of progress and superior education for girls, as compared to the existing small (but numerous) 'ladies' schools', known for their 'accomplishments' curriculum. The latter program, she suggests, was broader than is commonly understood; the teachers in these schools were better educated and more entrepreneurial than commonly credited; and a number of losses for girls and women were associated with the bureaucratization and syllabuses of the new institutions and with the new thrust to make girls the same as but different from boys through the schooling process.

In Theobald's history, the battles for the form of the state system of schooling, the 'free, secular
and compulsory' agenda that is the lynchpin of so many other history of education narratives, become a subdued, incidental and almost irrelevant story. In this account, concerned with the fate of girls and women and of certain forms of knowledge, what is noticeable is that some remarkable similarities mark both state and church systems. Moving to higher education, Theobald's record shows that the formal battle to gain women entry to universities in Australia was not, in broad terms, the suffragette-related, self-help campaign it was in England. In this country the arguments on women's behalf were voiced by men and were achieved against a lesser institutional and cultural opposition.

And those who think that a feminist history of women and education must be a story of never-ending discrimination will be disappointed to read Theobald's forthright challenge:

There was no heroic battle to admit girls to the state elementary school; there was never the slightest suggestion that they should be kept out [...] The possibility that the masculinist state may have created the conditions for women to imagine their lives differently has not informed the questions which we ask. (p192)

Theobald's own story of women, education and nineteenth century Australian culture is more complex. She has had a long-standing interest in the significance of the ladies' schools and the accomplishments curriculum, and she uses this to raise interesting questions about why historians have so readily assumed that these were trivial and insigificant. She discusses at some length the social and symbolic meaning of the curriculum such schools offered, in the context of changing material and social forms of the nineteenth century. And she draws attention to the part
played by the lives of these teachers in the construction of the new culture.

The 'accomplishments' tradition for women, Theobald notes, did not construct 'woman as nature' nor did it confine them to cultural achievements that were always seen as inferior, but it did separate women off from being 'makers' of culture. The form this curriculum took, Theobald argues, should be seen in the context of a broader shift in the valued forms of knowledge and in the association and dis-association of knowledge and power. The replacement of the ladies' schools by the 'academic' institutions of a compulsory system was one beginning of a longer process in which the symbolic and humanities forms of knowledge would lose out to more technical and instrumental forms.

On the women who taught, Theobald's account is that women who migrated and started schools, who went to universities, who became principals of schools, who developed a life without men, were variously forging possibilities within the cultural constraints of their time. They were active subjects not simply fillers of 'roles'. Moreover, Theobald argues, the diasporic migration of a class of women who started such schools and who developed in different countries a particular form of women's education, is something that has been missed by historians blinded by received ideas about what matters in education and in the building of new societies. But Theobald's account also shows that when the new systems of state schooling emerged, the men who took political and bureaucratic power for the state set up pervasive and systemic forms of discrimination which had long-lasting effects on women's career possibilities as teachers.

At the heart of Theobald's historiography is a history recuperated through individual biographies - and also a history which exposes the work of the historian. It is this explicit simultaneous
attention to women's lives in the 19th century and to the work of historians and other feminist theorists today that allows Theobald to negotiate admirably some tricky debates in contemporary feminist history: history as critique compared with history as recuperation of women's experiences; an interest in difference and suspicion of 'woman' as a category - while wanting not to reduce gender to something that scarcely matters; the demand for 'overview', for identification of key interpretations, but an interest in particularity. Through her method, Theobald decisively rejects a vision of feminist history as an account which gives an alternative but equally authoritative story of what happened, of what was the case, of a 'view from nowhere'. She constantly reminds the reader of the work that has to go on to even find some sources in the first place, and of the unevenness of the documents that have been preserved. And she draws the reader into the contemporary feminist literature, to draw attention to what goes into the construction of theories and interpretations on such matters as embodiment, the making of class, identity, so that we can see more clearly the story she is herself constructing and can think about its own inevitable lack of completeness.

Theobald's history gives more emphasis to adult women (and men) than to girls and boys. She deals a little with the life of the classroom, and has a chapter on the schooling of 'outcast' girls; but her most detailed and evocative work is the attempt to explore the lives of women teachers. Through fragmentary records she pieces together stories of their day-to-day battle to put together domestic and public work and to battle the authorities' unsympathetic reception of what they were contributing. She uses Steedman's work to ask whether the model of the 'good mother' was produced by teaching practices rather than being their source - was a product of the women teachers who 'flooded into the state-funded classrooms of Western nations in the nineteenth century', and who often had little time to be an attentive mother with their own children.
Elsewhere, Theobald brings into view the concerns of parents and bureaucrats who display uneasiness about co-education and take moves to ensure the presence of a woman in the school. These incidents in turn are used to draw our attention to the lack of critical attention by historians to the institutionalization of co-education as part of the new compulsory form.

_Knowing Women: Origins of Women's Education in Nineteenth-Century Australia_, is an important addition to Australian history, to history of education, and to Women's Studies. It explores knowledge, women and educational provision in a period of attempted reconstruction of all three. It tells a vivid story of people, institutions and debates in nineteenth-century Australia. And on every page it provokes the reader to re-think their prejudices, feminist and non-feminist, concerning what was (and is) being gained and lost in the recasting of education, and of knowledge and of women's place in this.

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