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## Portraying lives: headmistresses and women professors 1880s–1940s, by Tanya Fitzgerald and Josephine May

Y. H. Phoebe Tang

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Portraying lives: headmistresses and women professors 1880s–1940s**, by Tanya Fitzgerald and Josephine May, Charlotte, NC, Information Age Publishing, 2016, x + 138 pp., £79.50 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-68123-447-2; £51.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-68123-446-5; £47.50 (ebook), ISBN 978-1-68123-448-9

Rather than focusing on specific institutions, a single group of women or an individual, Tanya Fitzgerald and Josephine May tell the story of two groups of women educators in Australia and New Zealand: headmistresses and women professors. These women are selected for their occupation and also for their roles in pioneering female leadership in education. Adding to other historiography on women's education and women educators, such as Dina Copelman's *London's Women Teachers* (London, 1996), Linda Eisenmann's *Higher Education for Women in Postwar America, 1945–1965* (Baltimore, MD, 2006), and Kay Morris Matthews's *In Their Own Right* (Wellington, 2008), the authors use the portrait and portraiture method to explore both the professional difficulties and private lives of these educators. Portrait refers to the analysis of images, while portraiture refers to the 'methodological tool' that interprets images 'as texts' and places them in the 'social, cultural, and material world of subjects, viewer, and portraitist' (p. 4). The book begins with a co-authored chapter explaining the rationale behind choosing this methodology, which was developed by Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffmann Davis (*The Art and Science of Portraiture*, San Francisco, CA, 1997). Fitzgerald and May explain that the method does not just consider the analysed subjects, but also takes the experience and interactions of the 'audience' and the 'creator' into consideration (p. 4). Instead of drawing concrete conclusions from the stories, Fitzgerald and May aim to demonstrate the 'messiness' (p. 2) and non-linearity of the lives of women educators who strove to assert authority and became leaders of their own fields within patriarchal and bureaucratic frameworks.

The first section by May consists of three chapters featuring stories of headmistresses at female secondary schools in Australia. Each chapter uses a different type of portraiture framework according to the nature and contents of the sources analysed. Using the iconography method, May describes the photographic portraits of five headmistresses in office between the 1890s and 1920s on the literal, historical and cultural levels. Focusing on features such as hairstyle, accessories and clothing, and with supporting evidence from textual sources, May demonstrates that the gradually more informal attire in the portraits reveals how female educators increasingly attained autonomy, and asserted their professionalism by being the centre of a photograph. Next, May uses the biographical method and archival sources to discuss the experience of Mary Augusta Olsen, who disagreed with the Maitland community and the New South Wales Department of Public Instruction when she advocated for improved facilities at her school. May shows that inadequate official planning and the incompatible expectation of Olsen's leadership role in the 'masculine bureaucratic macrostructure' resulted in Olsen's departure (p. 54). In Chapter 4, May portrays Sarah Hatley Boyd by visualising her interpersonal relationships with her family, the community leaders and the officials as three concentric circles. May demonstrates that while Hatley Boyd was welcomed into the city of Bathurst as a hardworking teacher, the amount of support she received decreased as the circle expanded. Officials were not ready to accept her as a leader, especially when she pushed for reforms in the examination structure for the Bathurst Girls High School.

The next section by Fitzgerald portrays professors of Home Science at the University of New Zealand using 'career portraits' (p. 81) and a visual artefact, and with special attention to the

professors' private sphere. Fitzgerald first tells the stories of Winifred Boys-Smith and Helen Rawson. In addition to practising their expertise, they built personal connections to expand their networks. For example, Boys-Smith employed the daughter of the Chancellor as teaching assistant. The two professors also joined the International Federation of University Women to gather external support. Fitzgerald concludes that the two women 'occupied a third sphere' (p. 85), which was partly 'public' and formal, but also 'private' (p. 18) and 'individualized' (p. 85). Using a similar method to May (Chapter 2), in Chapter 6 Fitzgerald uses a visual artefact combined with textual sources, and tells the story of Ann Gilchrist Strong, who succeeded Boys-Smith and Rawson. Fitzgerald analyses Strong's commemorative plaque at the university's home science library. She observes that while the plaque celebrated Strong's professional life, it was confined within the institutional framework and did not provide clues about her personal life. Fitzgerald thus supplies background details on Strong's life, such as her lobbying for equal pay.

The authors have skilfully illustrated the incompleteness and biases of textual and institutional archives, especially in the final chapter. They highlight the need to locate and analyse other sources, such as photographs, correspondence, newspapers and artefacts. The authors also help the reader understand how messages are drawn from the sources. For instance, May first explains the 'self projections' and 'photographic interventions' standards of the late nineteenth century, such as the left cheek/right cheek bias in women's portraits: that looking to one side implied either 'rationality' or 'emotionality' (p. 22). She then uses this standard to analyse the photographs. May also remarks that Eliza Fewings' full-body portrait was unusual at the time, a detail that layperson-readers would not notice.

By admitting that they 'do not claim neutrality' in the interpretation of the subjects (p. 108), the authors have successfully encouraged the reader to participate and become a viewer of the subject-viewer-portraitist connection in the portraiture methodology. One might even say that the authors are viewers guiding the readers to become re-viewers. Through creating reader participation and input, the authors have also convincingly demonstrated the 'messiness' of the portrait and portraiture method as discussed in the book (p. 6). For instance, while Fitzgerald writes that Ann Gilchrist Strong's gaze in the photograph on the commemorative plaque was 'distracted or even inattentive' (p. 93), I felt that Strong's gaze was warm but determined. I therefore have been guided by Fitzgerald to first view the photograph through her eyes, and then become a viewer myself and re-view it on my own. My opinions then add to the body of conclusions that is neither final nor stable. As re-viewer, the reader receives personal experience that there is no definite answer to the interpretation of an artefact. This is a unique encounter not only for scholars of women educators, but also for the history of education in general.

In some places, extra background would make the arguments more comprehensible for a wider range of audience, especially students. The authors have utilised various sociological, cultural and feminist theoretical frameworks. While this opens up new analytical perspectives, it would be helpful for general readers if these theoretical backgrounds were explained in further detail. For example, more elaboration on 'performative subjectivities' (p. 41) would better establish the relationship between individuals' choices and the bureaucratic institution. Elaboration on 'embodiment theory' (p. 22) would also put emphasis on the significance of analysing the headmistresses' appearance. In addition to theoretical background, historical background would also help focus the argument on women. Even though male schools and teachers are not the focus of this book, at times it would be useful to juxtapose the experience of male teachers with that of the female teachers. In Chapter 3, May argues that Mary Olsen faced two obstacles: 'the masculine bureaucratic macrostructure' and inadequate planning and resources by the officials (p. 54). A comparison would make clear how much of Olsen's difficulties were from the second obstacle, which other schools and teachers also faced at the time, and how much were from her identity as a woman with a 'strong persona' (p. 55).

Tanya Fitzgerald and Josephine May have written a convincing book on women pioneers in education. The successful adoption of the portrait and portraiture methodology informs readers about the experience of the subject discussed and at the same time guides them to explore their own perspectives, thus educating them to study other sources with the same ‘messiness’ in mind. In addition to scholars studying women and education history, this book is helpful to those who wish to learn about mobile women and are interested in how transnational professional networks offer support. The engaging framework provided will be useful for exploring women in other occupations as well.

Y. H. Phoebe Tang  
*University of Hong Kong*  
 [phoebet@connect.hku.hk](mailto:phoebet@connect.hku.hk)

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