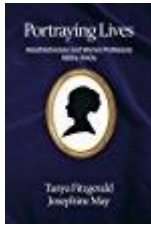


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Portraying Lives: Headmistresses and Women Professors 1880s–1940s



Title: Portraying Lives: Headmistresses and Women Professors 1880s–1940s

Author(s): Tanya Fitzgerald & Josephine May

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As women first pushed into school leadership positions and then the professoriate from the late 1800s through early 1900s, they gradually won hard-fought new powers. Almost invariably, however, these forerunners also encountered a bewildering array of obstacles, from subtle to brazen, all intended to restrict their professional possibilities. One powerful such form of resistance was the mischaracterization, minimization, or even omission of these women’s contributions in official records, a deficit that affects us into the present as we are left with few ways to understand those who crossed this significant inflection point.

Thankfully, Tanya Fitzgerald and Josephine May offer compelling responses to this historiographical problem with their book, *Portraying Lives: Headmistresses and Women Professors, 1880s-1940s*, an examination of the experiences of leading women educators in Australia and New Zealand. Fitzgerald and May embrace the methodologies of portraits and portraiture in the spirit of Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffmann Davis’s seminal work, *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (1997). Portraits, as Fitzgerald and May describe, frame an image “to understand how women educators were both presented and represented in archival records and for public visual and textual consumption” (p. 2). Portraits capture a temporal and spatial moment of a person’s lived experience, a moment that both reveals and expresses, and one that a viewer/reader might richly interpret in turn. Portraiture extends these possibilities by promoting “a more ecological understanding of potential dynamics between context, individual(s), creator, and audience” (p. 4). In this way, the writer and viewer/reader become vital to the interpretive whole. The authors skillfully detail their reasons for employing these methodologies in the first chapter, drawing on a growing body of biographical research in education that transcends more linear, conventional approaches and instead re-considers meanings embedded in official archives, even daring to interpret them artfully.

In the second through fourth chapters, May explores different approaches to portraiture as she highlights the stories of women who led female secondary schools in Australia. In the second, she

employs the iconographic method, examining photographic portraits of five women principals, arranged roughly in chronological order. She details aspects of these photographs such as lighting, position of head, and clothing, then interprets them within cultural contexts of the time. She closes the chapter by examining the photos comparatively and collectively, suggesting the “singularity and power of these female secondary principals” (p. 23) and how each “became increasingly more comfortable in unmasking her authority for the camera” (p. 38). May brings to each of the third and fourth chapters a close examination of a woman who led public secondary schools for girls in New South Wales (NSW). In each case, May plumbs NSW school archives for traces of these early women school leaders in official records of a system constructed by and for men’s control. She crafts portraits revealing women exercising remarkable agency, their performative subjectivities, despite a social structure that ignores, resists, or distorts their efforts. Mary Augusta Olsen, the first headmistress of the Maitland Girls High School, brought extensive experience and talent to her work, but ran aground as she firmly, but persistently pushed for adequate facilities and resources even as the male officials above worked against her, regarding her as unnecessarily demanding. In the case of Sarah Christina Hatley Boyd, principal of Bathurst Girls High School, May describes the “circles of relationships” within which Boyd performed, including the allies she effectively summoned to support the school as well as those who sought to constrain her leadership. May closes her depictions of Olsen and Boyd by noting the importance and complexities of “the biographical educational female subject,” which is “complicated by the bureaucratic archive” that largely ignored them (pp. 72–73).

Fitzgerald shifts focus in the fifth and sixth chapters to early women professors as she examines the lives of three women in the field of home science (home economics) at the University of New Zealand. In the fifth chapter, Fitzgerald describes how Winifred Boys-Smith and Helen Rawson found ways to build supportive networks, secure funding, develop research agendas to enhance the larger field, and, importantly, maintain deep friendship with each other. In the end, they and those around them developed personal and professional autonomy even as the university community relegated home science to the margins. In “Commemorating a Life,” the sixth chapter, Fitzgerald offers probing interpretations of a plaque honoring Ann Gilchrist Strong, professor and dean of home science, an installation physically separated from those of other prominent university figures. Carefully noting what is present as well as absent, Fitzgerald explores the boundaries of this terse statement about Strong’s public self, life, and contributions; and then she more abundantly elaborates details of a fully-lived life “beyond the institutional portrait,” offering a satisfying counterpoint (p. 96).

As a scholar who also focuses on recovering stories about early women education leaders, I have experienced many of the same frustrations in examining bureaucratic archives in the United States as Fitzgerald and May have encountered in Australia and New Zealand. My own efforts have tended toward “brute force,” or gathering and interpreting as much documentary evidence as I can find in the hope of rendering a more complete account, whatever that might mean. Fitzgerald and May instead thoughtfully choose a smaller range of artifacts and then probe them carefully to more deeply understand who created them and why; whose voices are not represented or possibly are

distorted; and what subtle meanings might lay hidden in a few key, but potentially overlooked words, or in the tilt of a head. Rather than attempting a comprehensive account of all or even many such women, they choose to portray a few individuals' lives that, when taken together, provide an esthetically and historically gratifying look at some of women's shared experiences.

Throughout *Portraying Lives*, Fitzgerald and May directly confront the gendered nature of archival documents in a wide variety of ways; but rather than abandon such artifacts, they insist that the "archive cannot be bypassed: it must be negotiated and disrupted" (p. 111). To this end, Fitzgerald and May's slim volume offers a well-curated collection of ways to quietly disrupt the patriarchal archive on which our prior historical understandings have been based.

Reference

Lawrence-Lightfoot, S., & Hoffmann Davis, J. (1997). *The art and science of portraiture*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.