AGE OF TRANSITION:  
A STUDY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIAN PRIVATE GIRLS'  
SCHOOLS 1875-1925

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines Victorian middle class values and expectations transplanted to early colonial South Australia to determine the significance of the 'English curriculum with accomplishments' in shaping female roles in the context of social mobility and the establishment of civil institutions and enlightened mores. Previous studies of girls' education beyond elementary level have concentrated mainly on the Advanced School for Girls, the University and the few Church schools founded before 1900. This study surveys numerous privately owned, often transient ladies' schools in existence since 1838 and then examines in depth four of the most significant and enduring in Adelaide.

Acceptance of women from the opening of the University in 1876 acted as a stimulus to transform the orthodox education of ladies' schools. Maintaining an emphasis on accomplishments, particular schools paid greater attention to the development of academic rigour, adopting a structured curriculum which prepared girls for competitive examinations. This work examines these schools' response to change and the resultant impact on pupils in terms of expanding their life choices.

With over one hundred pupils, Hardwicke, 1873-1910, gained initial examination success under its first untrained Headmistress, Mrs Shuttleworth. Subsequently, the wide interests of its professionally trained proprietors, the Misses Tilly, ensured that pupils were exposed to a variety of educational opportunities. Girls at Mrs Thornber's Unley Park School, 1855-1910, experienced a stimulating academic education in which the accomplishments were highlighted, as were the arts of civilised living. Under the moral rubric of seeking 'truth and beauty', Mrs Kelsey's Dryburgh House, 1876-1914, also accentuated rigour in the accomplishments while encouraging the formation of future independence.

These three schools pioneered an outward-looking education which developed increasingly autonomous young women who could adjust to contemporary social change. They contrast with the fourth establishment, Miss Dow's Yoothamurra, 1892-1926, which adhered to traditional and more limited aims.

The study concludes with an assessment of the significance of private schools and their proprietors on the transformation of girls' education and argues that their contribution rivalled that of the Advanced School and laid the foundation for larger corporate Church schools, the evolving pattern of the twentieth century.