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## **Lack of Men, Flame Throwers and Rabbit Drives: Student Life in Australia's First Rural Teachers College 1945-1955**

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*Abstract: This article examines student life in an Australian rural teachers college. The paper is informed by studies on university student life and extends these to Australia's first rural teachers college in the period 1945-1955. It explores the diversity of students' experiences in a small college with predominately female students gradually supplemented by male students. It looks at staff student relations in a college struggling to train teachers for rural Australian towns in the immediate post World War II period. While these rural students' lives were similar to those portrayed in the standard histories of teacher education students were well aware of the basic nature of the curriculum and were not uncritical of it. However, they viewed what was offered as feasible given the circumstances. Their life at college was broadening and fulfilling and led to rewarding careers that enabled them to make not insignificant contributions to the teaching profession*

### **Introduction**

Despite the vastness of the Australian continent, the great majority of its people live close to the seaboard and only a minority live in rural areas. However, this rural minority has that claimed educational services should be provided on the same basis as those in the capital cities. Achieving equality of educational provision has been especially problematic with respect to the education of teachers and, until 1926, all of Australia's teachers colleges were located in its capital cities.

In 1926, the first non-metropolitan teachers colleges were opened in the Victorian regional cities of Ballarat and Bendigo. The former commenced with an intake of forty-eight students and the latter with thirty-eight (Hyams, 1979, p.73). Both colleges were closed during the Great Depression and the Bendigo College reopened in 1945 and the Ballarat College in 1946. This paper examines student life at Bendigo Teachers College during the period 1945-1955. I have taken the liberty of claiming this was Australia's first rural teachers college. Strictly speaking this is shared with Ballarat Teachers College. As not all authors in *The Phoenix* give their first names, sometimes only initials are available. Some articles are not attributed at all.

### **Studies of Student Life**

The history of Australian university student life is often rudimentary, being chiefly confined to large urban institutions with middle class populations while neglecting rural campuses (Beer, 1996, pp.34-36). For example, one standard history of Australian teacher education mentions three of Australia's oldest non-metropolitan colleges only briefly (Hyams, 1979). Furthermore, some existing accounts lack depth, contain overtones of

disapproval and omit students' point of view, attitudes, values, perceptions and feelings (Beer, 1995, p.213).

Histories of student life need to capture the diverse experiences of students and their involvement in events and not just the views of the institution (Trimingham Jack, 1997, pp.42-46). They need to be wary of painting a picture of a 'complacent, materialistic, conservative and even somnolent student subculture' when in fact it was active and broadening and despite its limitations important in the development of people who would in many cases contribute significantly to the nation (Beer, 1995, p.227). Trotman and O'Donoghue (2010, p.183) make an effort to more fully capture student life in their study of female teachers but they too note that their story is only partial.

There are other considerations too. Can we better capture student life through narrative description than through theoretical analysis (Burstyn, 1990, p.4-5)? By breaking down student life to fit some analytic framework are the interconnections that provide a holistic understanding destroyed? Theories are prone to fashion and easily discarded; descriptive narrative may live on through its readers long after other interpretative material has passed from use. We also need to be aware of 'presentism,' which is:

*working back from the present with today's attitudes, questions and hindsight applied to yesterday's problems produc[ing] anachronistic accounts that by definition cannot be regarded as history (Dow, 1985, pp.429-430).*

Some of the histories of Australian teacher education written by scholars of the 1970s and 1980s judged earlier periods of teacher education from their then vantage point, seeing teacher trainees as passive (Hyams, 1987-88, p.115) and the curriculum as superficial (Hyams, 1979, p.111). Their accounts under-estimate the difficulties faced in teacher training in Australia in 1945.

When researching student life, there is a need to reflect on the assumptions and methods of analysis used (Trimingham Jack, 1997, p.45). Bogdan and Biklen (2007, pp.133-141) alert us to important issues in the sources used for this research. The chief primary sources for this paper were the Bendigo Teachers College student magazine *The Phoenix* (referred to hereinafter as 'TP'), supplemented with the personal history of one of the college lecturing staff (Burnett, 1973).

To deepen and refine the ensuing analysis, these sources were contextualised by the use of comprehensive histories of Australian teacher education. To test out emerging ideas, the research was shared with overseas scholars (Potts, 2009). An American scholar in the audience of this presentation informed the writer that these student experiences were similar to those of his wife, who had studied at a rural college in the United States.

Bendigo students named the magazine to symbolize the 1945 rebirth of the college. Howard Harvey, the 1947 editor, saw *The Phoenix* capturing the 'many sides of college life' (TP, 3, 1947, p.3). However, it contains little on the in-class curriculum. Successive editors experienced difficulties with getting copy, printing and costs (TP, 5, 1949, p.2: 6, 1950, p.3). How accurately did *The Phoenix* capture student life, given it was an end of year publication, when recollection of events had faded and students were soon to depart? On the other hand, would students have unwillingly contributed copy?

The articles in *The Phoenix* range over addresses by the college staff on teaching philosophy and techniques; student and staff reports of college events; visits and visitors; poems; short stories; and whimsical and ironical pieces by both staff and students. Thus the material ranges from the factual to the anecdotal. Consequently, there was a need to understand how the totality of the material portrayed student life and not to be overly influenced by the more outrageous and extraordinary reporting. However, important issues were often expressed by students in ironic ways. Furthermore, even anecdotes had a place, for they helped confirm or illustrate a problem, paradox or world view or challenged established or authorised views (Grossman, 2003, pp.167-168).

P. Williams, the 1949 editor, thanked 'lecturers for making time available for editing and correcting proofs' (TP, 5, 1949, p.2). Did *The Phoenix* present an authentic version of student life, given that censorship by college staff could have been exercised in these actions? One student expressed reluctance to say too much:

*no more will I divulge, for I wish to complete the year 1949, secure under the wings of The Phoenix, with no desire to mingle my ashes with his (TP, 5, 1949, p.14).*

However, mistakes in *The Phoenix* in dates, grammar and punctuation question how closely staff edited copy and, as well, students' complaints are reported.

### **Australian Teacher Education 1945-1955**

Australian teacher education in this period was dominated by state provision and control (Hyams, 1980, p.248). By 1946, there were seven state teachers colleges in Australia (Barcan, 1980, p.338). In Victoria another six teachers colleges were established during the period (Eunson, 1973, 1, pp.909-911). The colleges were co-educational but their attached residential hostels were not. Courses of varying duration and for various school subjects and levels were provided and as a general rule colleges enrolled students who had completed secondary schooling and provided a one-year course for rural primary schools, a two-year course for larger primary schools and a three-or-four year course with perhaps some university-taught courses for secondary school teaching (Turney, 1975, p.373). There were also university provided one-year secondary teacher training courses for those who had university degrees.

Victoria persisted until 1951 with a system whereby teacher trainees worked as pupil teachers before enrolling at a teachers college (Cleverly, 1972, pp.79-80). The Victorian authorities asserted that the system produced teachers who were equipped for the practical tasks of teaching because, as their ages were not too different from those of their students, they understood them better than did the completely college trained teachers. The real reason why the pupil teacher system survived was undoubtedly its low cost.

The courses offered in the state teachers colleges had three main purposes: to extend students' literacy, to teach them the content of the school curriculum and the techniques to teach it and to develop their professional outlook through courses in educational philosophy, history, psychology and cultural pursuits. A large part of the training was spent observing and teaching lessons in schools. The basic teachers college course was dominated by the needs of rural schools whose significance in Victoria can be ascertained from the fact that at one point of 2,503 Victorian primary schools 2,073 had enrolments of twenty students or less (Cleverly, 1972, p.81). As a condition of their employment, teachers had to agree to serve in rural areas.

During World War II, 1,000 trainee teachers and 5,000 teachers joined the armed forces (Hyams, 1973, pp.104-106). Subsequently, severe demands on Australian teachers colleges were made in the immediate post-war years. There was an urgent need to complete the interrupted training of those who had joined the armed services and to replace teachers who had left during the war. Restoring training to pre-war levels was no solution because of the rise in school enrolments due to the post-war baby boom and large-scale immigration from Britain and Europe.

For primary school trainees, a teaching career was a means of upward social mobility (Hyams, 1973, p.123). They were the children of farmers, small shopkeepers, tradesmen, unskilled or semi-skilled workers or minor clerical employees. Women, who faced more restricted career options, came from higher occupational status backgrounds than the men. The crucial importance of females in Australia's school system is illustrated by Victoria where they constituted 58.5 per cent of teachers (Cleverly, 1972, p.85). However, male-dominated state education bureaucracies subjected females to inequitable treatment

within the teaching service (Meadmore, 1996, p.30). Women in training could not marry and married women could not enrol in teachers colleges.

The colleges were in many ways 'corrective institutions', not just because of the time they spent supplementing the students' secondary education, but because they endeavoured to inculcate approved values in students and suppress undesirable ones (Cleverley, 1972, p.81). They completely supervised students' leisure time and attempted to develop college esprit de corps through sport, competition, prizes, house systems and anthems. In their time they were seen as 'Lady Bountifuls and psychic organisations of staff and students' (Cleverley, 1972, p.81).

### **The Re-opening of Bendigo Teachers College in 1945**

In 1944, the Victorian Government accepted the need for more primary school teachers and that their training would be best completed in rural areas (Burnett, 1973, p.25). The government was convinced that Melbourne Teachers College was overcrowded and a reopened Bendigo Teachers College would find favour with rural constituents (Hyams, 1975, p.73). It thought that teacher training should be closer to the homes of country students, as on graduation, trainees would remain teaching in country schools because their training had been focussed on rural schooling. Bendigo College students were trained to teach basic literacy and numeracy in isolated and remote and often one-teacher schools. The curriculum emphasised the importance of rural life and rural employment.

### **Student Life at Bendigo Teachers College**

Student life comprised both official and unofficial dimensions. Both overlapped for college staff were involved in all aspects of students' lives. Students were aware of the limitations of their course for as Anne Hawke, a 1954 student observed, 'it was more or less an extension of our high school education' (Hawke, 2004, p.7). Students accepted that in the post war period only so much could be attempted in any college training course (TP, 5, 1949, p.3). The academically-raw trainees found little to complain about in the paternalism that enveloped them (Cleverley, 1972, p.81). Students' modest academic backgrounds meant they were generally untroubled by the overtly vocational course. Their sense of contentment was similar to that reported by Western Australian female trainees of the 1920s and 1930s (Trotman and O'Donoghue, 2010, p.184).

For the ex-servicemen, college life was a stark contrast to the horrors of active service and offered a quick route to secure employment. Many of these students did so well that they were given what were called extension scholarships to attend Melbourne Teachers College to pursue further qualifications. In any event, the Bendigo course was so short and life so occupied there was little time for complaints. Students realised that they could never be 'wholly prepared for what lies in the future' and thought that they had been 'educated in the fundamentals of [their] work, the foundations of which [they could] base [their] own system of teaching on' (TP, 5, 1949, p.3).

## **The College Buildings**

Student life occurred in temporary and substandard physical facilities. The college was located in 'part of the top floor of Camp Hill State Primary School' (TP, 1, 1945, p.7). Tradesmen were still finishing the college and the hostel during 1945 so students 'developed a special technique as the year went on, for negotiating ladders, tools, planks' (TP, 1, 1945, p.12). Lectures had to be held in Rosalind Park and the Upper Reserve, in the hostel lounge and on garden seats. Students were easily distracted during lectures and other classes due to less than ideal venues. In 1945, the college acquired a wireless and a gramophone but because the electricians had not arrived 'to provide the power necessary...the value of this acquisition' was negated. In September 1945 the college obtained a piano, two pictures on loan from the Bendigo Art Gallery, fourteen prints (nine of these were hung at the hostel) and a table for the library.

By 1948, the one large lecture room seated fifty but there were one-hundred-and-one students and the library was also used as a staff office (TP, 4, 1948, p.20). The Principal, Mr Mills, sent half the students out to schools on teaching rounds to solve the lack of teaching space. By 1949, an extremely small library collection still restricted the course but in spite of these limitations students 'remained undaunted' (TP, 5, 1949, p.2).

In 1945, Sandhurst House Coffee Palace was converted to a hostel for forty-three women students while the remaining eleven lived at home or with friends in Bendigo (TP, 6, 1950, p.2). By 1951, there were three hostels, Sandhurst House, Comersdale, and Lancewood, housing seventy-five women and thirty-five men. The latter two were converted houses that had been built during the 1870s. In 1949 the question of whether the hostels needed a visitors book for guests was debated by students and staff but no such book eventuated (TP, 5, 1949, p.11).

Resident staff oversaw students' lives in the hostels. They were regimented and orderly with the day at Comersdale Hostel beginning at 6.30 am with six minute showers (TP, 6, 1950, p.13). In many ways, lack of proper physical facilities during their training prepared them for their future teaching careers, which were marked by a continued quest for adequate facilities as Victoria struggled to cope with an expanding school system.

## **The College Curriculum**

Students studied for the Trained Primary Teacher's Certificate. From 1945-1951 this was a one-year course and from 1951-1955 it was two years. In the one-year course students studied subjects taught in Victorian primary schools; methods and techniques of teaching; the history and development of education and psychology and mental testing. From 1945-1947, at the instigation of the Principal, female students did a six months course in cookery: the only college students so to do (Burnett, 1973, p.45). This shows the power of the Principal, who simply decided that it was appropriate for female students to undertake this course. It also illustrates the gendered nature of the curriculum, for the male students did not study cookery.

From 1951 a two-year course with four main components and a common first year commenced. This covered basic general education, elective subjects, functional subjects and in both years extended periods of up to 12 weeks practical teaching in schools.

Students regretted that they 'had such a short and crowded time' (TP, 2, 1946, p.3) with 'little time for anything but the actual academic side of college life' (TP, 3, 1947, p.3).

They noted that:

*in the relatively short space of ten busy months, we are conscious of an unbroken succession of lectures, discussions, assignments, tests, teaching, assemblies, social functions and excursions (TP, 4, 1948, p.25).*

## Staff

Year	Staff		Students	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1945	3	6	0	54
1946	3	7	8	45
1947	4	6	24	32
1948	6	5	34	67
1949	7	7	36	72
1950	6	8	35	75
1951	6	8	35	75
1952	6	8	35	75
1953	6	8	60	83
1954	6	8	54	84
1955	6	8	48	76

**Figure 1: Staff and student numbers and gender, Bendigo Teachers College 1945-1955\***

\*During this period the Principal was always a male.

The small staffing establishment had to cover all areas of the curriculum. Thus in 1945 Jessie Burnett lectured in English literature, expression and method and was resident lecturer at the hostel where she was responsible for the general conduct of the premises, student discipline and the social life of the students (TP, 1, 1945, p.11). In 1947 the Principal, G. Mills, lectured in psychology, history, principles of education and science and also wrote the college song (TP, 3, 1947, p.6).

The Principal informed students that their teacher preparation ‘involved both knowing the subjects and knowing how to teach those subjects’ and because ‘a teacher is no mere technician’ students needed to know ‘something of the history, psychology and philosophy of education’ (TP, 1, 1945, p.4). He warned students that as teachers they would rely very much on non-monetary rewards because their salary would be only ‘enough money to live on and until the state realises its duties to teachers, little more’ (TP, 1, 1945, p.4).

In 1946, Mills told students that:

*never before have young people embarked on the profession of teaching in more exciting times...never before have the people expected so much from education (TP, 3, 1946, p.4).*

In 1947 he cautioned students ‘to be concerned about more than just imparting knowledge’ (TP 3, 1947, p.4) and in 1948 he stated to students that:

*never has there been a greater interest in education than now and never has the community looked more hopefully towards education (TP, 4, 1948, p.3).*

On his return in 1950 from a study tour of England to investigate teacher preparation, Mills told students that education was:

*a spiritual interaction between personalities [and they must leave college and] enter into [their] work in a spirit of educational adventure which [they] must refuse to allow to be dampened by those of his [their] older colleagues who either never had or have lost this spirit (TP, 6, 1950, p.31).*

## Students

Apart from the gender divisions noted it is more difficult to talk about student characteristics. However, it is probable that students came mainly from country high schools, were the daughters and sons of rural and working class parents rather than professionals, were the first in their families to undertake tertiary studies (based on Beer, 1995, p.215: my reasoning is that students in both institutions would have come from similar backgrounds) and were legally indentured to the Victorian Department of Education via scholarship arrangements.

The prerequisite for entry was the Victorian Leaving Certificate (Burnett, 1973, pp.42-43). Prerequisite subjects gradually increased to five Leaving subjects plus matriculation. The female students who enrolled at Bendigo College in 1945 were at least eighteen years of age and had been junior teachers for six months. Ivy Schier, a 1945 student, noted that it was not only academic qualifications that were important: for students 'must pass the doctor's examination' (TP, 1, 1945, p.21).

The editor of *The Phoenix* observed in 1950 that some enrolling students had teaching experience 'but for others this was a new venture and a new province of exploration' (TP, 6, 1950, p.3). The 1954 editor's remark that 'many of us have nearly lost our teens' highlights the students' ages (TP, 10, 1954, p.4).

The small student enrolment and small number of staff and their respective gender influenced student life. While the majority of the students were female, the Principal was male. There was nothing remarkable in this for during this period the Victorian Education Department was male dominated. What effect this female enrolment had on student life is harder to ascertain.

The college Principal of 1949, M. Morris, saw the all-female enrolment of 1945 in grandiose terms: 'This was historic; never before in the history of Victoria had the enrolment of a teachers college consisted entirely of young ladies' (TP, 5, 1949, p.2).

Morris thought that this had far-reaching effects for 'those girls gave the college...something very much more: its emphasis on the personal side of teaching'. Given the status of female students and female staff and the centrally imposed curriculum it is difficult to see female students being solely responsible for this personal side of teaching. This was a vague and amorphous view of teaching that allegedly meant females were especially concerned with teaching students rather than teaching subjects and were more nurturing and caring than male teachers.

When Jessie Burnett began lecturing at the college in 1945, war was still being waged and there were no male students (TP, 6, 1950, p.25). She found arranging balls and social activities was a major issue for her because of the scarcity of male partners. She believed that due to the scarcity of men, female students had to devise their own recreation. Burnett packed lunches and took the female students for long walks. However, when the war ended the number of men students increased and there were 'more men of suitable age (etc.) in the city, so 'the interests...changed. No longer [did] the girls need a lecturer to take them walking'.

For the female students teaching provided employment with reasonably salary and conditions, enabled movement into the ranks of the middle class and provided status and respect. These things were not insubstantial. College life may well have had elements of discrimination for female students but it provided an avenue to a more prosperous and brighter future than they would have otherwise had. Many female students from this period, including the secretary of the 1945 students' representative council, Pauline Murphy, became distinguished primary school principals.

The enrolment of small numbers of ex-servicemen after the war had some effect on student life. In 1946, the eight male students were all ex-servicemen. In 1949, the Commonwealth Returned Services Training Scheme assisted male ex-servicemen (TP, 5, 1949, p.9). One of these students did not complete his course due to illness. Of the remaining students one became secretary of the student council, one became president of the student



council, five had married prior to entry and one family had a baby during the year. In 1950, an ex-serviceman, Mr Paul Birch, became president of the student council (TP, 6, 1950, p.6).

Betty Bryan (1945) thought that teachers could help build a peaceful world by encouraging students to look beyond their own country (TP, 1, 1945, p.3). Mavis Lock, (1946) believed that the people looked to teachers 'to reshape the world' (TP, 2, 1946, p.3). Howard Harvey (1947) warned his fellow students that while teaching conditions could be 'most disheartening' they:

*must never allow our disappointments to bias our attitude towards the children whom we teach...our attitude should be to consistently improve conditions for them...we must go out of the schools and be one of the community instead of adopting a detached official attitude. (TP, 3, 1947, p.3)*

In 1948, students were told that personal relationships in teaching were most important (TP, 4, 1948, p.25) and the 1949 editor of *The Phoenix* suggested that 'community spirit' was a key to successful teaching (TP, 5, 1949, p.3).

In 1949 students were exhorted to work for the betterment of Indigenous people and to 'educate them for a better understanding of the whites and educate the whites to a better understanding of the Aborigine' (TP, 5, 1949, p.27).

The 1950 editor of *The Phoenix* warned his fellow students that 'teaching is not a matter of mechanization of a rigid code of approach and presentation' (TP, 6, 1950, p.3). What mattered was the individual student with the teacher's life being 'essentially one of service'.

R. McDonald (1954), suggested that the key to pupils' success was the teacher:

*yes you may well wonder what they will be like so it may be suggested that they will be like their teacher: at least the children the teacher insists they be (TP, 10, 1954, p.18).*

Students were irreverent toward the Principal and his staff. In 1945 at the first assembly they:

*meet Mr Mills and realised at once [they] had found a very good friend, although it was not till much later [they] decided on the affectionate title of "Georgius Rex" (TP, 1, 1945, p.20).*

The 1949 students observed that:

*lectures have been interesting or boring according to taste. Sometimes [they]... had a nice little sleep interrupted by a lecturer emphasising a point and...hoped [they had not] missed a point the lecturer will ask in an exam (TP, 5, 1949, p.31).*

In 1954, one H. M. Turner was emboldened to question the education department's policies on teacher recruitment. His article, *A Grudge*, railed against 'the almost ruthless method of enticing students into teachers college' (TP, 10, 1954, p.19). The student claimed general conversations at the college supported his views noting that:

*I have seen the film used by recruiting officers four times. I almost know the script by heart as well as the sequence of shots. It glamorises teaching unnecessarily...it puts the college course out of perspective. It particularly emphasises arts and craft and practical work. It is misleading to students who have had to work very hard for their results. The film does not mention the importance of straight-out academic work...the quality of college students would rise if students knew what was coming before they signed along the dotted line. Lecturers would be happier, the students would be able to grumble with less justification (TP, 10, 1954, p.19).*

### **Weekly Assemblies**

An important part of student life was the Wednesday Assembly. This was: *designed as an hour's pause in a busy week...staff and students join[ed] together in song and discussion that engender[ed] mutual understanding and goodwill (TP, 2, 1946, p.13).*

A rotating student chairperson conducted the Assembly so that as many possible had 'the experience of presiding at a gathering of teachers'. The Principal and staff arranged for guest speakers to appear and as well as 'administrative officers and teachers in other branches of the service [who gave] a more realistic appreciation of the work of [the] Department', these included singers and instrumentalists.

### **Young Farmers Clubs.**

The rural bias of student life was evident in the annual visits to Young Farmers Clubs. These clubs were organised in rural Victorian schools to promote future careers in agriculture. Some were close to the college and students and staff regularly visited them. For example, in 1946 following lunch and a speech by the President of the Young Farmer's Club at Nanneella South State School, the students were given a series of talks by the pupils (TP, 2, 1946, p.16). In 1947, students visited Calivil South Young Farmer's Club where talks and demonstrations were given 'on grasses, manures, milk testing, irrigation, tractor maintenance, flame throwing apparatus and in particular practical demonstrations of the method by which all this work [was] correlated with arithmetic and other school subjects (TP, 3, 1947, p.25).

Allied to these visits were those to the college in 1947 and 1950 by the supervisor and staff of the State Schools Horticultural Nursery who lectured on horticulture and gardening in schools (TP, 3, 1947, p.26: TP, 6, 1950, p.27).

On the latter visit, practical demonstrations were given and advice offered on planning a garden at a rural school. The advice was seen as having particular relevance for the female students: 'the girls will no doubt follow his advice of "enlisting the help of the young eligible farmers" in this task'.

### **Social Activities**

Students observed that life was 'what you make it, no matter what is made' (TP, 1, 1945, p.5). Students engaged in a range of social activities that included balls, dances, hikes, parties, excursions, and concerts. During planning for the 1945 presentation ball, female students wondered 'would they get enough men' but were delighted when 'men rallied from all corners of Victoria'. At the ball, the Principal presented: 'each of "his girls" to the Mayoress of Bendigo with each young lady carrying a posy in which were grouped the college colours' (TP, 1, 1945, p.5). The students noted, that 'for once the male section of the party was pushed to one side and was forced to watch the fair sex being independent'. Six male students from Melbourne Teachers College came to this ball.

At the 1950 ball, the Principal presented students to the Mayor and Mayoress of Bendigo with 'the man problem successfully and effectively solved by the presentation of lines of six girls with two men as escorts' (TP, 6, 1950, p.19).

The shortage of males for social activities was repeatedly commented upon, as was the beauty of the female students. The 1947 welcome dance was affected by 'the acute shortage of males' but the April Fools Social of the same year found 'partners more plentiful due to outside support' (TP, 3, 1947, p.7). The comment was made of the young ladies at the 1954 Presentation Ball: 'they really are gorgeous girls, aren't they, men' (TP, 10, 1954, p.5).

Most student activities were attended by at least one staff member: for example, when students hiked to Mount Macedon in October 1945, Jessie Burnett and other members of staff went with them (TP, 1, 1945, p.5) and in October 1948 students moonlight hiking to Spring Gully were accompanied by Miss Northey (TP, 4, 1948, pp.10-11) and a welcome dance in the Bendigo High School Hall in 1946 was attended by the Principal (TP, 2, 1946, p.7).

One form of social activity, which shows the blurred nature of the official and unofficial aspects of student life, was the series of informal parties hosted by the Principal and his wife at their home. Students of 1945 reported that;

*Mr Mills as host is quite as good as Mr Mills as Principal, and that is saying something. Mrs Mills apparently knows how students enjoy supper, as she always prepares a very large and attractive supper (TP, 1, 1945, p.7).*

## College Play

Each year students staged a play. The 1949 play was produced to supplement student association funds (TP, 5, 1949, p.10). In 1954 the students presented *Arsenic and Old Lace* raising £20 for the Bendigo Sound Shell Appeal and an identical sum for the *Council for Children's Aid* (TP, 10, 1954, p.19). Students extended the production for a further two nights following a request from the Bendigo Scouts' Association and raised £30 for it.

In 1950 the annual concert included the singing of the national anthem by 'even the boys' and 'the bevy of beauties...was so commendable that even Ron Fry had difficulty keeping his eyes to the script' (TP, 6, 1950, p.14). That students were training to be loyal subjects of the British Empire was evident in the singing of *God Save the King* at this concert and further so at the Principal's farewell in October 1949, when he proposed the toast to the king (TP, 5, 1949, p.13).

## Sport

Sport was scheduled for Wednesday afternoons. During 1945, the all female, small student population and the lack of facilities influenced the sports played. The students participated in swimming, softball, volleyball, and tennis with the latter being played on the courts at the Bendigo Girls School and students competed in the Bendigo YWCA Basketball Association on Saturday afternoons. In 1946, sport was organised via house competitions, with basketball, hockey, softball, swimming and tennis. By then competitions between the Melbourne, Ballarat and Bendigo Teachers Colleges were being held and in 1948 students competed in the Bendigo YWCA Annual Sports Day. Sporting events were supervised by staff as can be seen from the November 1948 Queenscliff Camp where staff imposed an '11 pm lights out' and a '7 o'clock, all out, rise and shine' rule (TP, 4, 1948, p.16).

The wider context of student life was driven home in 1949 when, due to the polio epidemic, the Bendigo and Ballarat Teachers Colleges sports meeting was cancelled (TP, 5, 1949, p.6).

Students helped organise the Rural Practising Schools Annual Sports Meeting, which was staged on the Bendigo Upper Reserve. At this they entertained children from these schools and assisted in the conduct of the meeting. The sports gave 'student's practical experience in conducting a programme of athletic events suitable for young children' (TP, 3, 1947, p.26).

## Visitors and Visits

The visitors to the college from the state department of education and from the wider community blurred further the official and unofficial dimensions of student life. The long list for 1945 was typical. On 22 February the Director of Education and the Minister for Education officially opened the college. Also during February Miss Fox and Miss McGowan from the YWCA visited the college; in March Miss Virtue, the Supervisor of Physical Education, lunched with the students and Miss McClure of the Domestic Arts Hostel visited, as did District Inspector of Schools Pedrick, while his successor Mr. Haddow and his wife attended a hostel social evening. In May the Principal of Melbourne Teachers College addressed the college, admitting to students that they 'were almost as good as the Melbourne Students' (TP, 1, 1945, pp.7-9). He dined and spent the evening at the hostel.

In July, the Chief Inspector of Primary Schools watched students teach, cook and sew and then dined with students at the hostel. In the same month the Inspector of Technical Schools spoke at the college assembly and was then entertained by the students at the hostel. Miss R. Evans, the Domestic Arts Inspector, spent an evening at the hostel. Four secondary inspectors visited the hostel and were entertained by the students at a social evening.

During August the headmaster of Bendigo High School and the Headmistress of the Bendigo Girls School, dined with the students at the hostel.

In November, a former Principal of the college, who was now Senior Inspector of Schools with the department of education spent a week in Bendigo and observed students teach, comparing their efforts with those of Melbourne students.

In 1947, Australian Broadcasting Commission staff gave six lectures and demonstrations at the college on the schools of the air. Students found 'great practical interest' in these, as the majority of them would be teaching in rural schools in the following year (TP, 3, 1947, pp.25-26).

Visitors were not always so closely connected with the state department of education even though their visits were career relevant. During October 1945 staff from Myer's Department Store instructed students 'in the art of dress and make up' which students found 'interesting and instructive' (TP, 1, 1945, p.8). In 1947 a Cyclax Cosmetics beautician conducted a similar demonstration for female students (TP, 3, 1947, p.8).

Students accompanied by staff also visited Melbourne, Ballarat, Geelong and Adelaide. These inter-college visits involved sport, debating and tours of the colleges. Here too there was often a wider aspect to visits. Thus during a visit to Melbourne Teachers College in August 1947, as well as an inspecting the college and attending a concert, students received lectures at the staff training department of Myers (TP, 3, 1947, p.11).

In 1950 the Principal, convinced the department to allow a trip for the college's one-hundred-and-eight students to the Kiewa and Ovens Valley to inspect the hydroelectric scheme (TP, 6, 1950, p.18).

### **Student Associations, Committees and Societies**

With the small size of the college there was either a greater opportunity for all students to be involved or a danger that too few students would dominate. In 1945, for example, twenty-six of the fifty-four students were on committees.

In 1946, thirty-two students out of fifty-three held committee positions. Of the eight male students four held committee positions with a male being president of the student council.

In 1947 the president and secretary of the student council were both males and the vice president was female and the remaining six council members comprised three males and three females. The president in 1947 was a returned and married ex-serviceman who became a father during his presidency.

In 1948 eleven males and twelve females filled the twenty-three student association positions respectively. The president was a male and the two vice presidents were a male and a female. Again in this year the president was a returned serviceman who had returned from England with an English wife and two children while the family added a third child during 1948 (TP, 4, 1948, p.12).

On the matter of editorship of *The Phoenix* for approximately half the editions a female student was editor and for the other half a male student.

While female students were always in the majority but on student committees men held a proportionally greater number of committee positions, the issue was seen as women and men sharing committee positions on a fifty-fifty basis over a number of years. The aim was not proportional representation. Student representation on committees also reflected the gender bias of the college staff and that of their future employer where most key positions were held by men. In the case of the ex-serviceman who held committee positions, it was thought that their perspectives and skills added greatly to the roles they undertook. Overall many of the committees had a greater proportion of men because 'second wave feminism had not yet appeared and there was little of the awareness of gender that later engulfed the western world' (Beer, 1995, p.224) even though with hindsight the gendered order in which these students lives were carried out appears to be a powerful one (Trotman and O'Donoghue, 2010, p.183).

Student committees had close links with the college staff. In 1947 the Student Council Report thanked 'Mr Mills and other lecturers on the staff for their assistance, guidance and unstinted co-operation during the year' (TP, 3, 1947, p.23).

The college had a student branch of the Victorian Teacher's Union. The years 1948 and 1949 saw record membership due to the secretary campaigning for better accommodation for male students (TP, 4, 1948, p.18).

In 1950 the focus was better allowances for students. In 1954 R. G. Boyce appealed for more students to be involved, as 'unionism is your insurance against injustice. It is your aid to the fulfilment of your ambitions' (TP, 10, 1954, p.6).

The college had a Protestant Student Christian Movement and a Catholic Loyola Group. The first meet on Monday afternoons and in 1947 it discussed 'Is there a God?', 'Christian Vocation' and 'Christianity and Atheism' and screened a movie which resulted in a 'goodly sum' being forwarded to the World Students Relief Fund (TP, 3, 1947, pp.24-25). In 1948 it ran a social evening in aid of the same fund and raised £4-11-0. (TP, 4, 1948, p.19). During 1950, fifteen students attended and in 1954 thirty.

In 1949 the boundaries between various phases of student life again merged when the Principal, addressed the group on the importance of Christian faith (TP, 5, 1949, p.9). During the same year Mr Aitken spoke on the incompatibility of Marxian Communism and Christianity illustrating, that the effects of the Cold War extended to these students. In 1950, Margaret Thomas, a field secretary of the SCM, spoke on its work in universities and teachers colleges to the group (TP, 6, 1950, p.11).

In 1954 visits from the clergy of the Bendigo protestant churches and others including Nancy Mitchell from Adelaide Teachers College and the Reverend Pierson, a missionary stationed in Africa, were highlights (TP, 10, 1954, p.22).

By 1948, Catholic students had formed a Loyola Group. This met under 'the spiritual director Father Ryan' each fortnight for discussions and social events (TP, 4, 1948, p.19). Topics discussed included evolution, and the Spanish Inquisition and social events included a hike to One Tree Hill. By 1949 there were thirty members. Highlighting the sectarianism of the time they regretted 'that the opportunities were lacking for the group to work in close co-operation with other college groups such as the SCM' (TP, 5, 1949, p.9).

The year 1950 saw the group flourishing, with thirty students meeting in the St Killian's Church Clubrooms (TP, 6, 1950, p.11). Three social events were held and illustrating the rural nature of the college, the secretary recorded that for 1950 'one of the

most enjoyable functions attended by members was a rabbit drive held on 24 September and unanimously voted an outstanding day’.

The religious engagement of students was typical of other Australian rural students of the time who ‘brought their faith with them’ to college and university (Beer, 1997, pp.326-327). Students from rural areas of Victoria were more religious than those from the city (Mohl, 1971, pp.121-123).

This faith dimension affected how many students and staff referred to their future work in teaching as being ‘missionary’ in nature. This is an interesting paradox for students were not opposed to the strictly vocational nature of their course but on the other hand they spoke of their future careers in much broader terms. They saw their careers in Christian terms of a vocation (TP, 4, 1948, p.3) concerned with justice, sharing the difficulties and hopes, joys and sorrows faced by the less fortunate (TP, 1, 1945, p.3 and TP, 2, 1946, p.3) and assisting them to strive for betterment (TP, 3, 1947, p.3) and undertaking this mission with ‘sympathy, tolerance and understanding’ (TP, 5, 1949, p.3).

## Conclusion

This study of student life in Australia’s first rural teachers college captures the diversity of experiences that made up students’ personal and professional lives. It fully recognises the limitations of its source material, which could be claimed to be at best partial. That said, the wide variety of data contained in the source material helps to put flesh on and blood into the students whose lives are captured by *The Phoenix*. This suggests that such student magazines are useful sources for hitherto neglected insights and understandings and should not be simply rejected as merely anecdotal collections.

While the teacher training that was provided in this rural college was recognised by students as being short and basic, it offered entry into middle-class careers and opportunities for professional and personal advancement. Students thought given the circumstances it adequately prepared them to commence teaching careers in Victorian rural schools.

Even with a predominately female enrolment, males dominated the staff and many of the student societies. Female students acquiesced in this state of affairs and seemingly accepted it. Students exhibited a degree of religiosity and this influenced how they viewed their careers as being in part a missionary endeavour to help the less fortunate.

Students enthusiastically undertook their training and all that this entailed. Their college lives were shaped by the lack of resources and substandard physical facilities; the short length of the course, which was pragmatically focussed and theoretically undeveloped, but broader than sometimes portrayed; the demands made upon them by the college and the department of education. The context was a committed but small staff; a student population that was overwhelmingly single and female, but later broadened to include more males and especially returned ex-servicemen; life in close proximity mainly in college hostels supervised by college staff; sporting and social activities; loyalty to king and empire; sectarianism; and by the scourge of polio outbreaks. The college and its administrators confined student life but it was not untouched by the harsh realities of the wider world. Despite the challenges confronted during their training students were contented and committed to pursuing a career in teaching.

How different student life as captured here was from that in urban colleges deserves further research. This study suggests many similarities as Bendigo students made frequent visits to other similar colleges and the record there is of similar issues. What distinguished Bendigo student life was a strongly vocational curriculum focussed on rural school teaching and the expectation that the teachers would have a high community profile.

Just as worthy of further research is the question why, how and with what consequences did this form of student life survive until 1976, when it had ceased in most

other Australian teachers colleges. What effects did this have on its trainees and the school systems they finally taught in? Ironically, the less vocationally focused teacher training became and the broader the college training curriculum, the greater were the criticisms of it from students in the colleges and teachers in schools who claimed teacher education was divorced from the real world.

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