

***Educating Girls* – Erica McWilliam**

Educating Girls was launched by Her Excellency the Honourable Quentin Bryce, Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia on 7 September 2013. Ms Bryce commended Brisbane Girls Grammar School on the publication of such a “beautiful and important book”. Feminist and author Dale Spender, provides an introduction for the text, which was commissioned by the school and written by Professor Erica McWilliam. Each of these esteemed ladies has connections to The Alliance of Girls’ Schools Australasia, most notably Her Excellency is the Alliance’s Patron-in-Chief.

In Amanda Bell’s foreword she describes the vision for *Educating Girls* as a text that would profile the influence of women, interrogate the relationship of women to education and society, and consider their contributions:

We wanted a story of educating girls from the inception of a new colony in the nineteenth century weaving its way through our twenty-first-century context with over a century of stories, scholarship, care, opportunity and inspiration for young women, supported by visionary women and men.

This is precisely what *Educating Girls* does. It is rich, comprehensive history of not only how Brisbane Girls Grammar School came into being, but a narrative and pictorial story of significant Australian women over three centuries.

Drawing on a deep archival history, using records from BGGGS and a host of other public documents, McWilliam covers the education of girls from 1875 to the present, while fully acknowledging that “there is no linear path in this story, or any story, more it is a tale of values and ideas that shift and reshape over the generations with the sensibilities of the times, and which need to be analysed and pondered from many sides in order to understand the fuller story”.

McWilliam’s writing style is expressive and eloquent. For example “the perfunctory notes reveal little about Fraulein Fürer beyond the fact of her being at odds with her employing body...She came and she went, leaving just a faintest whiff of misfit in her wake”.

The text is broken into chapters with the overall focus on “being”. Being grammar, being womanly, being teachers, being eccentric and other elements of being are explored throughout each chapter. Milestones, brief biographies, building timelines and details such as “women’s firsts” are highlighted in short sections at the end of each chapter. These dot points contrast nicely with the full chapters, which require concentration and commitment from the reader to enjoy their full scope.

An absolute highlight of *Educating Girls* is the selection of old and new photographs which are deliberately placed together for contrast. An early double-spread

photograph of Grammar girls supporting their team at a Queensland Girls' Secondary Schools Sporting Association event in 1924, is set against the final photograph in the book, of 2013 students cheering on competitors in the Interhouse Cross-Country Competition. Despite the obvious differences of black-and-white versus colour, and the 89 years that separates these photos, it is the similarities that astound. The looks on the girls' faces as they encourage their peers in each competition is the same in 1924 and 2013. Each girl is enthusiastically caught in full participation, smiling, expectant and hopeful. The other carefully selected photographs in the book are just as engaging. The only criticism is that there could have been many more wonderful images to break up the text.

Another excellent focus in this book is the liberal inclusion of stories and quotes from the girls, teachers and principals. This quote is from a former student about principal Milisent Wilkinson who served from 1900-1912: "The maid used to take her lunch tray across the Assembly Hall – we could see that on the tray every day was a little bottle of champagne and if there was a winter salad on it, in chopped beetroot was a large 'M' (Milisent)". This particular "Lady Principal" seemed to provide much fodder for her students as another recalls her "coming to assembly with a coloured parrot resting on her shoulder".

McWilliam carefully connects historic and modern narratives. Quaint history like chaperonage is pulled into the present day - "whether the concerns are about the protocols of chaperonage or cyber-chatting, the proper exercise of an educator's responsibility continues to be a fraught one". Controversies, whether set in the historic or latter years, are included in *Educating Girls*. The deaths of students, historic tedium of classroom routines, or eccentricities of particular staff are all glued by an underlying praise for all-things grammar.

Educating Girls is not a light read. It requires the reader to engage and immerse in McWilliam's eloquent style and the historical strands of Brisbane Girls Grammar School. The author has worked hard to make explicit links between the centuries and this is a strength of the text, which will appeal to a wide range of readers. There would be few historical texts that accomplish what *Educating Girls* does and each person who dips into the text will be richly rewarded for their time.

McWilliam, E. (2013). *Educating Girls*. Queensland: Queensland University Press.