FASHIONING THE COUNTRY TEACHER IN THE INTERWAR YEARS

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In February 1922 the editor of the SA Teachers' Journal introduced a 'Country Corner' column that was to be contributed by a member of the Women Teachers Progressive League (WTPL) under the pen name 'Tish'. Tish was Phoebe Watson, the WTPL secretary (a position she had held since its inauguration in 1915), Women's Warden at the Teachers College and Mistress of Method in charge of the short course of training for country teachers. Phoebe had had a long history of activism in the Teachers Union on behalf of women teachers, especially those in country schools, and more broadly in organisations such as the Women's Non-Party Political Association and National Council of Women. She had also been involved in training teachers for country schools since 1908, and in 1922 almost every South Australian teacher in a one-room school had passed through her hands. With an authority borne of these experiences, Phoebe wrote the Country Corner column more or less regularly in the SA Teachers' Journal until 1938, two years after she had retired from the Education Department. Between 1938 and 1941 the column reappeared in the Guild Chronicle, the journal of the breakaway Women Teachers Guild, of which Phoebe was President. This article focuses on representations of the country teacher in the Country Corner column in the interwar years. I argue that Phoebe invoked contemporary discourses of youth and femininity to construct the rural teacher as a youthful, responsible, attractive and marriagable woman. Following on from recent research into ways in which 'city' functioned both as a place and representation in education, I also begin to identify discourses of the 'country' and the 'city' in constructions of the teacher and teachers' work.

Spanning nearly two decades, then, the Country Corner column provides another entrée into the discourses pertaining to an important but oft-neglected cohort of teachers in the history of twentieth century education. In contrast to early research into nineteenth century teachers that portrayed them as heroic missionaries, Margaret Nelson claims that the early twentieth century female rural teacher is 'one of our favorite victims'. Low pay, adverse working conditions, isolation, loneliness and restrictive rules governing behavior are themes that pervade the literature on rural teachers, factors which combine to create an image of the hapless schoolmarm. Diane Hallman notes that in Canada the female rural teacher has been represented as a pawn and a pauper while in Australia the foundational

image has been that of the worker against the system. However, the early twentieth century was a period of significant social change with notable shifts in discourses of femininity and a focus on youth and the expansion of mass consumer culture. In the interwar years femininity became 'equated with heterosexual desirability whose central component was youth'. Young women were expected to dress attractively and the mass production of fashionable garments made them more affordable for workers with limited wages. An increasing number of social activities were oriented towards youth and relationships with peers as well as family became important in young people's lives. Young women teachers were not immune from these changes and whatever their conditions of work, state school employment provided them with a small disposable income and some potential to engage with an increasingly fashion-conscious and commercialised world. Kathleen Weiler's research has highlighted different ways in which rural women teachers in California negotiated these social changes and used teaching to shape their identities in the interwar years. Challenged by the expansion of mass consumer culture and changing discourses of femininity, Weiler argues that many women teachers rejected the conventional representations of the spinster schoolmarm. This article complements and expands on Weiler's work by explicating representations of the girl teacher's engagement with youthful femininity and by pointing out some ways in which discourses of city and country mediated her work in the one-teacher school and her engagement with mass consumer culture.

In framing the article I use the metaphor of fashion firstly to discuss the teacher's dress and appearance and secondly to illuminate the ways in which Phebe Watson carefully fashioned or molded a particular image of the country teacher in terms of her character, her pedagogical work, her leisure and her ultimate destiny. My claim is that Phebe was concerned with creating a preferred identity for the country teacher rather than recovering a truthful version of the teacher's life and work. In the Country Corner column Phebe positioned herself as a 'guide, philosopher and friend', indeed a wise and mature woman, in relation to the country teacher, and on many occasions invoked her moral authority to discuss the ideal teacher. While this self-authorised role was based on her seniority in terms of her age and experience, Phebe was equally concerned to be seen 'to have journeyed along the road with youth, particularly youth in that freedom of outlook which has marked the progress of these later years'. It seems that she did not want to be characterised as old-fashioned and divorced from contemporary society. To this end she posited shared values and shared experiences, and ensured that

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8 S A Teachers' Journal, December 1936, p. 26; See also S A Teachers' Journal, February 1922, p. 138 where Phebe also reflects on her position vis-a-vis the girl teacher. My thinking about the ways in which the text might be interpreted has also been influenced by A. Convery, 'Listening to teachers' stories: are we sitting too comfortably?' *Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1999, pp. 131-146.
she promulgated up-to-date, fashionable ideas about youth, femininity and pedagogy, among others, in the Country Corner column.

'A girl who thought something of her dress and looks, and rightly so too, in moderation!'

From the outset, the teacher in the Country Corner column was represented as young and female. Throughout the 1920s the column was addressed to ‘Dear Girl Outback’ and there were constant references to the ‘girl’ teacher. When challenged about the sex of her readership in April 1929, Phebe responded that the column was being ‘written for the girl just beginning’, but stated that she ‘would be only too pleased to widen its scope’.

Notwithstanding the change of address to ‘Dear Folks Outback’ one year later, the column continued, first and foremost, to conceptualise the country teacher as a ‘girl’. In so doing it reflected the reality of employees in one-teacher schools in this era. Almost all of them were young women who had completed a short course of nine month’s training under Phebe’s tuition at the Teachers College in Adelaide before being sent as ‘unclassified’ Class VII teachers to mostly remote one-room schools. However, the girl teacher was not only joining the Education Department’s paid workforce for the first time. According to Phebe Watson, she was also entering into a world where new freedoms were being offered to the youth of the day.

After the deprivations of World War I, the 1920s saw the growth of consumer culture and the creation of the ‘flapper’ as representative of the young woman in her late adolescence and early twenties. The flapper had a youthful boyish figure, was physically fit and healthy, and played active sports. The emerging advertising industry urged her to ‘bob’ her hair, wear make-up and purchase a range of beauty products to maintain her youthful appearance. She wore the latest fashions - glamorous but comfortable dresses that enabled her to move freely. She was intimately associated with the city for it functioned as the modern, busy centre of commercial life with shops selling the latest fashions, entertainment venues such as dance halls and cinemas, and the new clerical occupations that facilitated her economic independence. The archetypal flapper worked in a city office as a typist or clerk. She spent her leisure time among friends of both sexes, dancing and attending movies, working through relationships and enjoying her independence.

However, flapperdom was ‘a fine line to be trod’ and conceptualised as a temporary stage in a woman’s life cycle. The flapper could also be characterised as irresponsible, selfish and vain, and if she smoked, drank alcohol in public and stayed late at dances she was deemed to have overstepped the boundaries of respectable womanhood, thereby risking her marriageability. Romantic relationships were integral to the flapper’s life but ‘women’s access to sexuality was ordered within and around the institution of marriage’. During this period of economic and social independence the youthful flapper could flirt with men and enjoy the hubbub of modern city life but her ultimate destiny was marriage. So whatever the freedoms associated with the growth

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10 S A Teachers’ Journal, April 1929, p. 69.
12 Elder, p. 158.
13 Elder, p. 152.
of consumerism in the 1920s, marriage remained the path to fulfilment of the young woman as it had been for her mother and grandmother.

In the Country Corner column discourses of youth and femininity that were associated with the flapper era were inscribed on the girl teacher, but not ‘overdone’. As far as personal appearance was concerned it was ‘perfectly legitimate’ for the girl teacher ‘to be modish and up-to-date in [her] dress’. The ‘one piece frock’ of the 1920s allowed for freedom of movement and was ‘hygienic and comfortable and well suited to our climate’. The girl who did not ‘conform in some way to the fashions of the day’ either by being too old-fashioned or choosing dresses that were inappropriate for work was said to be exercising ‘very bad taste’.14 In the interwar years, however, the girl teacher’s appearance served at least three broader purposes. Firstly, it was her ‘duty to dress as suitably and attractively as possible’ in order to initiate the ‘little bush children ... in the many intricacies in the realm of good taste in dressing’.15 Here, the country is represented as a place of ‘backwardness, ignorance and limitation’16 to which the girl teacher in her ‘city frock’ would bring a degree of urban sophistication.17 Country children and their mothers in particular were positioned as limited in their outlook and lacking the cultural capital of city dwellers. Thus the girl teacher was expected to introduce contemporary culture and interests to rural communities. Indeed, ‘her pretty dresses will be a source of delight and emulation’ for children and their mothers.18 Subsequent sections of the article will show that she would also bring progressive pedagogy and curriculum into the outback school and then modern labour-saving devices into her home. Secondly, the ‘bright, alert well-dressed girl’ teacher was required to play her part in disrupting the traditional image of ‘the schoolmarm with stern visage, threepennybit knot of tight hair and a cane in hand, that is still the mental vision of us even though we fluff our hair to its utmost’.19 In the 1920s and 1930s pejorative discourses regarding single women teachers, especially those beyond the age of marriageability, intensified, and they were frequently portrayed as disengaged from contemporary understandings about femininity and the modern world. Their ideas as well as their dress and appearance were deemed to be so old-fashioned that they were rarely conceptualised as flappers. In the interwar years the dominant image of the woman teacher was that of the spinster no matter where she taught.20 The girl teacher, then, needed to make the most of her youth and femininity, within reason of course, in order to support women teachers. In effect, she was expected to reconcile a range of competing discourses and situate herself on a continuum somewhere between flapperdom and spinsterhood, dressing attractively in order to demonstrate her engagement with the modern world, and fulfil her duties to her rural students and women colleagues.

The third function of the girl teacher’s dress related to her character which in turn was indicative of her professionalism. The country teacher was ‘a girl who thought something of her dress and looks,

17 *S A Teachers' Journal*, March 1926, p. 93.
18 *S A Teachers' Journal*, October 1922, p. 328; See also Spencer, p. 124.

and right’ and often the ‘right’ was just as watchword as the ‘right’ was for self-respecting army officers. Where for them ‘the uniform’ ensured even a private soldier was not ‘a dirty’ man, for her emblem was not of material character but clearly related to the task at hand.

Integration of rural and Country life was rather more about professionalisation, character and the uniform of the girl teacher, which was her ‘backwards’ and’ forwards’.

She ‘provincialised’ and ‘nationalised’ the woman teacher.

From the rural girl teacher to perform the professional task of a subsequent generation of women was said to change in 1920s. ‘Girls’ was often in itself a name for the girl teacher, an individual, a confidant, a friend, a companion to the girlteacher’s student.
and rightly so too, in moderation! A pleasing appearance means self-respect for ourselves and very often the respect and pleasure of those around us.21 Her character and conduct were marked by ‘two watchwords: “Moderation” and “Tolerance”.22 An ‘innate sense of rightness and decency’ engendered self-respect and enabled the girl teacher to find ‘the right way to conduct [herself] socially in these days where freedom sometimes deteriorates into license’. To this end she negotiated a middle path between ‘the stupid sheep-like fashion of following where others lead’ and ‘appearing stupid and unsociable, even a prig who considers herself superior to her associates’. Such moderate and responsible behaviour was not simply a matter of self-respect and steadiness of character; it also indicated her respect for her employer, the Education Department, and the teaching profession. The girl teacher’s strength of character enabled her to successfully serve ‘the Department which trusts you to carry on your job cleanly and responsibly, to the best of your ability’.23 Such conduct also exemplified her commitment to the teaching profession. As the Country Corner column reminded her:

We like to think of ourselves as professional people, but if we are to take our place, socially and intellectually, with other professions such as that of the clergy, lawyers and doctors, we must assume the behaviour and prestige that entitles us to such recognition.24

Integrity, responsibility and moderation were key character traits in professional people and the Country Corner column fashioned the girl teacher’s character along these lines.25 Nevertheless, it was rare for constructions of the rural teacher and her work to be explicitly informed by a discourse of profession in the Country Corner column. The following discussions will show that whatever her character, dress and conduct, the girl teacher was located on the margins of the teaching profession and the margins of civilisation when she journeyed to her first outback school with her trunk full of her “best” frocks in which [she] hoped to make a favourable first impression.26

She ‘pinned RIP on to [her] evening frock, folded it sadly and placed it at the bottom of the box’

From the first issue of the Country Corner column in 1922, loneliness and isolation were seen to pervade every aspect of the girl teacher’s life and work in the outback. Indeed, Phoebe Watson subsequently stated that she wrote the column ‘for the lonely and discouraged girl’.27 The first column was saturated with references to loneliness and it was a regular theme thereafter, appearing most often in the January and February columns that marked the beginning of the school year and the girl teacher’s first appointment.28 Descriptions of the landscape, for example ‘the lonely plains or confining hills’ and ‘enclosed valley … uninteresting plain … lonely beach’, were deployed to identify the girl teacher’s geographic location, thereby adding evocatively to the theme.29 In taking up her first

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23 S A Teachers’ Journal, July 1929, pp. 146-147.
24 S A Teachers’ Journal, July 1937, p. 16.
27 S A Teachers’ Journal, April 1929, p. 96; See also Reid & Martin, p. 50.
28 See for example S A Teachers’ Journal, February 1922, p. 138; January/February 1921, p. 18.
position in the outback school, the girl teacher left 'the comfort of the family circle for the comparative isolation of the boarding house, the joy and life of the town for country silence and seclusion'. And in the first weeks of her appointment she was required to come to terms with new living and working conditions.

Teachers in the country most often boarded with local families and the Country Corner column acknowledged that living in 'the stranger’s home' required careful negotiation and considerable strength of character on the girl teacher’s part.31 She needed to be 'on good terms with the woman of the house and ... willing to be helpful in small ways'. However, the responsible girl teacher did not assume 'too many of the household tasks as these may become irksome and interfere with the preparation of [her] school duties'.32 Although the 'first feelings of loneliness and strangeness' wore off in time as the girl teacher ‘experienced the open-heartedness and hospitality of country people’ she remained somewhat isolated in her 'far away corner'.33 Similarly, she faced ‘professional solitude’34 as far as her work in the country was concerned and this was the case whatever her relationships with the local community: 'In the narrower surroundings of small communities, your work has its special features of monotony, which not even the kindness and sympathy of good friends and neighbours can wholly relieve'.35 Thus in discussions of both her living and working conditions as well as her dress and appearance, the country continued to function as a place of ignorance and limitation, and the 'ever-ready hospitality of outback folks' did not ultimately compensate for the loss of family and city life.36

Although some aspects of the girl teacher's life and work were peculiar to her location in the outback, she shared with all of her colleagues the understanding that teaching was an enervating occupation. This was particularly so for the professional who saw teaching as an 'honourable calling' and for whom 'the end of each day sees 'the virtue gone out of them'.37 Spending their days in the company of children rather than the 'adult world' teachers were apt to lose 'their sense of perspective and proportion'.38 So time and again the Country Corner column argued that it was 'essential that teachers should have adequate time and opportunities for mental relaxation and physical recreation'.39 For the girl teacher 'modern dancing' was 'a fine way to promote social intercourse and splendid exercise'.40 It also had the added benefit of mediating the recurring image of spinster schoolma'rs as 'a censoring, disapproving band ... the repressors of fun and jollity'.41 Yet the girl teacher faced particular problems in accommodating these suggestions for the country was consistently positioned as a place of loneliness, isolation and limitation. Indeed, when she arrived at her outback destination she 'pinned RIP on to

35 S A Teachers' Journal, November/December 1924, p. 946.
38 S A Teachers' Journal, February 1923, p. 409.
39 S A Teachers' Journal, February 1934, p. 12; See also S A Teachers' Journal, February 1923, p. 409, November/December 1924, p. 946, April 1935, pp. 29-21; Robinson, p. 11; Cavanagh, p. 54.
40 S A Teachers' Journal, June 1927, p. 113.
41 S A Teachers' Journal, February 1923, p. 411.
The responsible girl teacher knew ‘how necessary holidays are from the recreational point of view of mind and body’ and given the aforementioned limitations of the country, she almost invariably spent her holidays in the city where she could ‘become [her] natural self’ again, displaying her youthful freedom in a commercialised world. In the city with its ‘great buildings of civilization, meeting places, libraries and theatres, the centre, the activity, the light and indeed, enlightenment’ she could engage in flapper-like behaviour, in moderation of course, but also fulfil her professional obligation to ‘rest and recuperate’ from the rigours of teaching. To these ends she spent her days in invigorating activities such as walking and shopping, window shopping mainly, given her very low wage. ‘Surely an impecunious, but still aesthetically minded teacher may feast her eyes on the glimpses of a woman’s paradise which circumstances forbid her to enter’. She also renewed acquaintances at the Teachers College, her place of learning, where her former lecturers ‘hardly recognised the strapping buxom figures that some of you presented, for the pale attenuated students of former days’. Towards the end of the holidays she visited the bookshops to purchase books that had been reviewed in the Country Corner column. These included children’s fiction and pedagogical material for use in the classroom and novels for her pleasure. Thus by day the young, healthy and energetic girl teacher moved freely about the city, enjoying its hustle and bustle after the isolation and loneliness of the school term in the outback, and regaining her sense of perspective and proportion as she returned to the adult world.

For evening’s relaxation … we choose our prettiest frock. We do our hair - almost like a typiste. We put - ah daring touch! - the powder on our unaccustomed nose’, and spend the evening with friends. Unlike the typist who was the archetypal flapper, the responsible girl teacher could flirt with flapperdom in her choice of dress, hairstyle and make-up, and social activities, but not go all the way. So she accompanied her friends of both sexes to the theatre, perhaps to enjoy an opera or musical that had been reviewed in the Country Corner column, and they certainly attended the College Reunion Dance. The responsible girl teacher chose wholesome British rather than American films as some of the latter were perceived to have ‘an insidious influence … on the minds and moral tone of our young folks’. In her social conduct as well as her dress she made the most of her youth and femininity, but in moderation, as she sampled the city by night. Severely censured, however, was ‘the young girl teacher’ who:

had got herself much talked about because of her association with a man in a nearby township who had a most unsavoury reputation. In spite of friendly warnings she was allowing this man to take her driving and to dances … It shows a lack of right standards

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42 S A Teachers’ Journal, October 1922, p. 328; August 1928, p. 167; September 1935, p. 25.
44 Williams, p. 5.
49 See for example S A Teachers’ Journal, October 1928, p. 167; May 1929, p. 93; September 1932, p. 22.
of conduct in the girl and must eventually lead to weakening of character, and unhappy realization of mistakes.  

Weakness of character jeopardized her professionalism and she was roundly berated about this matter. She was told that her escort needed to be:

the right kind of companion, and, if not available, the girl will wisely refrain from putting herself into a position which brings criticism on herself and disrepute on the profession which she should be ready and willing to uphold.  

Like those who enter the ministry, a teacher is under a moral obligation to do nothing that brings disrespect on her calling. Furthermore, in succumbing to the excesses of flapperdom by staying late at dances and choosing the wrong kind of man, the girl teacher had placed her marriageability at stake. Rest and recreation were absolutely essential to the girl teacher’s mental and physical well being but not at the expense of her character, professionalism and ultimate destiny. The following discussion will show that, like the flapper, paid work was but a temporary stage in the girl teacher’s life for she was expected to marry. In the process she also resolved the problems of loneliness and isolation that had dominated her life in the outback.

‘Any girl will marry if and when she finds the right mate and the right circumstance’

Although ‘pleasant companionship between young people of opposite sexes’ was encouraged, the Country Corner column was rarely explicit about matters of courtship and marriage. Nevertheless, a heterosexual relation within marriage, sooner rather than later, was deemed to be the life course for the girl teacher in the country, and understandings about courtship and marriage were frequently registered in the book reviews that dominated the Country Corner column, especially in the 1930s. It was expected that the responsible girl teacher would take up ‘healthy and worthwhile novels for recreational reading’ rather than fiction ‘either of the kind that overstresses sex or of the very light order of mystery and detective novels’. Historical as well as contemporary romances and adventure novels were steady fare and Australian authors were promoted enthusiastically. A ‘wholly charming romance, healthy in tone’ was recommended in February 1933 but Woman’s Destiny and Birth Control also forewarned the girl teacher of her forthcoming responsibilities. Meanwhile, the marriage bar was firmly in place in the South Australian Education Department and the girl teacher faced the stark choice of paid work or marriage. Perhaps to facilitate this decision, the recommended reading in June 1935 included:

a good problem novel, of the struggle of a girl between a career and a marriage. Alice Gale is a teacher, talented in many ways, selfishly wishing to retain her lover as well as her freedom to pursue her own way of living.  

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50 S A Teachers’ Journal, April 1930, p. 80.
51 S A Teachers’ Journal, June 1937, p. 22.
52 S A Teachers’ Journal, June 1937, p. 22.
53 S A Teachers’ Journal, June 1937, p. 22.
56 S A Teachers’ Journal, June 1935, p. 29.
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Whatever her dilemmas, the girl teacher was left in no doubt that 'any girl or woman will marry if and when she finds her right mate and the right circumstance'. But in the difficult economic times of the early 1930s the circumstances were not right for her to marry quickly, thereby making way for more Teachers College graduates:

For, and now I am addressing the girls among you, unless things improve enough for a good many of you to complete the little cycle of events – and get married, there are very few schools vacant. So here's to better times for those on the land, many more optimistic young farmers and more blushing brides.

Although the ellipsis coyly represents courtship, the girl teacher finds romance and companionship in marriage so that the country is no longer a lonely and isolated place. But it could still be backward unless she introduced modern labour-saving devices: 'So, girls, when your turn comes, see to it that some provision is made ... for labour-saving devices inside the house that is to be your home.' While it was acknowledged that occasionally the girl teacher might not find Mr. Right, and that she should be guaranteed her economic freedom via equal pay for equal work, the possibilities of life-long female companionship were only registered in the very complimentary reviews of Winefred Holtby's novels. Notwithstanding these alternatives, the girl teacher was encouraged to 'agree with the idea that to be happily mated, to have a home of [her] own, to be able to have children ... would be the ideal state of being.' Like her contemporaries among the typists who worked in city offices, the girl teacher in the country was expected to be a transient in her occupation.

In essence, in the Country Corner column a range of discourses were used to construct the country teacher in the interwar years. First and foremost, the country teacher was young, that is a girl teacher. She was fashioned as youthful, attractive and tastefully dressed. Neither a flapper nor a spinster, the girl teacher had the strength of character to negotiate 'the current of modern easygoingness' that was seen to characterise the era. Maintaining appropriate standards of social conduct as a responsible woman and teacher, she engaged in the activities of modern youth such as dancing, the cinema and shopping, but the Country Corner column was less forthcoming about her courtship. It seemed to be experienced vicariously in the romance novel but there was no doubt that she was expected to conform to the gender expectations of the time by marrying and leaving paid work. Her location in the outback mediated her experiences too. The girl teacher was positioned as a model of urban sophistication in her appearance and dress but the country was repeatedly represented as a place of loneliness and isolation from all that was modern. Thus in order to participate in the new freedoms on offer to the youth of the day and to maintain her physical and mental well-being, the girl teacher was expected to return to the city in her holidays. There she would also replenish her pedagogical tool-kit by visiting the bookshops, meeting with colleagues and revisiting the Teachers College where she had first been inducted into modern teaching methods. The following section will show that, notwithstanding the assumption of a short tenure in the occupation and her rural location, the girl teacher was expected to take the 'new

57 Guild Chronicle, August 1939, p. 9.
ideas which are being tried in city schools', as well as the latest fashions into her outback school in the interwar years.

**'Progressiveness' in the one-teacher school and beyond**

From the introduction of compulsory schooling, the South Australian state school system, especially in the country, had been built on the labour of uncertificated teachers, the majority of whom were girl teachers in the 1920s and 1930s. Senior administrators often attributed their lack of credentials to an absence of commitment to teaching as a profession. However, on the matters of training and qualifications the Country Corner column constructed them more agentically without discounting their problematic conditions of employment. Their brief nine-month course of training focused on the administrative responsibilities and the pedagogy required to operate successfully in a one-teacher school. Beyond that, the girl teacher was ‘anxious to improve’ her credentials but unable to access resources such as university courses which were provided for city teachers because of her outback location and meagre salary. In 1925, however, a substantial salary increase awarded to women in one-teacher schools was seen to be a distinct fillip for the girl teacher:

> With the added inducements and avenues of promotion that the award opens up there will be many of you, I’m sure, more anxious to qualify and since a IIA qualification is now not at all difficult of attainment, many of you will be looking to quite a nice little salary in the future.

The IIA qualification was the minimum credential required for certification as a trained teacher and thus entry into the profession. Nevertheless, the spectre of transience continued to inform the description of her salary as it did in other aspects of her life and work, for there was no suggestion that the girl teacher might need to provide for herself economically for a lifetime. Throughout the 1920s the problems surrounding her qualifications and salary continued. In the 1930s she suffered more than other women teachers when the Arbitration Court invoked her inferior training and credentials to reject her salary claims. However, the Country Corner column continued to construct the girl teacher as well prepared to meet the challenges of her pedagogical work in the outback:

> One deprecates the system which names the outback teacher as ‘unclassified’ thus suggesting to the lay mind, a kind of ‘unskilled labourer’. Nothing could be more misleading, for your special course of college training has been designed to fit you for the group work of the one-teacher school.

Notwithstanding the problematic nature of her training and qualifications, the girl teacher was expected to ‘bring some light and happiness into the lives of those children who are so far away from the big centres of civilisation and for whose physical, mental and spiritual welfare you make yourselves responsible’. The following discussion will demonstrate that in both curriculum and pedagogy she compensated for the isolation and limitations of the country, bringing with her not only the latest fashions in clothing but also the progressive methods from the enlightened city.
The girl teacher's daily work more often than not took place in an inadequately equipped, 'dingy schoolhouse' which in the summer months was all too susceptible to the ravages of heat, dust and flies.68 And in the 1920s and 1930s the annual Qualifying Examinations undertaken by students in their final year of primary school dominated teachers' work in the last term of the school year.69 Nevertheless, the girl teacher was expected to meet the requirements for successful teaching, namely good examination results, and compensate for the narrow curriculum and the limited experiences of her country students:

Although your energies will naturally be directed towards the subjects that make for efficiency, and which qualify the children for the examination, I would urge upon you the wider outlook, the cultivation of those thoughts and ideas that make for fitness of character, the development of the spiritual side as well as the mental and the physical.70

To reconcile these disparate ends, she took the children's minds off the summer heat with 'talk of some new work ... which would create great interest'.71 She stocked the library shelves with modern children's literature, and introduced new teaching strategies from craft work catalogues, *The Art of Debating and Music and the Listener*, for example, all of which were purchased during her sojourns in the city.72 The Country Corner reported on city conferences, thereby keeping her up-to-date with progressive ideas such as the Dalton Plan and the 'Mason' method of teaching that 'used reading and narration' in subjects such as history, geography and nature study.73 She strove 'to carry on poetry teaching ... making it an essential part of the curriculum and trying to inculcate in the children's minds the love of poetry and English literature'.74 And when domestic science became part of the curriculum in city schools she endeavoured to begin a similar course 'with the upper girls' in her outback school. Yet whatever the girl teacher's success in expanding the horizons of her country students and introducing modern methods, her future continued to lay in matrimony:

Mind you have a cooking day when the inspector comes, and being a mere man he is bound to fall a willing victim. I can see efficiency marks soaring, and the Department minus a great many more teachers, whose prowess as cooks will have secured them a place in the matrimonial market that mere brains never could!75

Although the first Country Corner column had only promised 'hints for successful work, up-to-date methods and apparatus' to support the progressive girl teacher in her outback school, it always seemed to keep her ultimate destiny in mind.76 Curriculum and pedagogy aside, expectations of the girl teacher's work extended well beyond the school. Not only did she bring 'bright surroundings and progressiveness' into the classroom but she also prepared her country students 'to take their place as future citizens' through ongoing extra-curricula

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70 *S A Teachers' Journal*, June 1931, p. 10.
71 *S A Teachers' Journal*, March 1922, p. 156.
73 *S A Teachers' Journal*, September 1923, p. 587; October 1927, p. 219.
74 *S A Teachers' Journal*, September 1934, p. 25.
75 *S A Teachers' Journal*, October 1925, p. 192.
activities such as the Junior Red Cross and Girl Guides. Both boys and girls could belong to the Junior Red Cross but it was the Girl Guides, an organisation focusing exclusively on girls, which was most enthusiastically promoted in the Country Corner column. Girl teachers as 'servants of the state, and guides of the young, and loyal adherents of our Great Empire' were 'bound to admit that [Girl Guides] has wide possibilities in the training of right citizenship of our girls.' Thus the responsible girl teacher formed a Girl Guide company to 'worthily uphold the high ideals of womanhood and service to the community' and was 'particularly proud' when the Teachers College Cadet Corps rallied before the Duchess of York when she and the Duke visited South Australia in 1927.

In the aforementioned activities the girl teacher's brief was focused on girls but she was also asked to support special events such as the centenary of South Australia. In 1935/36 she was expected 'to do her bit for women' by collecting donations for the Women's Centenary Council's (WCC) project to build a 'Memorial to Pioneer Women ... a tangible memorial that will benefit the women and children of today, particularly those outback!'

In 1936 the girl teacher bought the WCC's publication, *A Book of South Australia: women in the first hundred years* as a keepsake, and organised events 'so that the children will remember this first Centenary year with pride and thankfulness as citizens of a great country, in spite of the disabilities of its far-away, outback spaces.' Yet again the girl teacher mediated the limitations of the country, and by extending her work to embrace these extra-curricula activities she also took her place in the community as a loyal woman citizen, with a particular orientation towards supporting women and girls. While this role could last well beyond her short tenure in the occupation, the other service she was expected to perform, that is to her colleagues as a member of the Teachers' Union was circumscribed by her location in the country, its orientation to its city constituency and the assumption that she was soon to marry.

Notwithstanding admissions that the Teachers' Union 'reflected the view and opinion found within city limits' the girl teacher in the country was urged to pay her membership fees and band together with all teachers. When she resisted union membership, reasoning that 'I'll be out of it soon. I'm sure to be married in a year or so,' the Country Corner column provided the following retort:

Right! We have all said the same words at some time or another – and may you live happily ever after! But meanwhile you have entered the teaching profession, and, if you are honest, should be prepared to accept the livelihood it offers. One of the voluntary responsibilities assumed by all thinking, earnest members of the profession is that before they lay down their work, they must carry the torch of progress a little further along the road.

The responsible girl teacher, therefore, paid her union fees and demonstrated her professionalism by attending the annual conference that was held in the city during the school holidays.

During the school term the Country Corner column kept her informed about salary negotiations, and
she rejoiced and commiserated according to the decisions of the Arbitration Court. As relations between men and women in the Teachers’ Union gradually deteriorated in the 1930s, however, the Country Corner column urged the girl teacher to transfer her commitment transferred to her women colleagues in the city-based WTPL. In 1936 she was reminded that her membership of the WTPL ‘strengthens the bond of union between all women’ and when the leading women teachers in the city secured from the Teachers Union and formed the Women Teachers Guild (WTG) in 1937, she was expected to join and to publicise the WTG’s activities among country teachers.

In the late 1930s the girl teacher was clearly expected to align with the WTG rather than the Teachers’ Union. During the holidays she made time to visit the WTG headquarters and announced that she was ‘pleased with the spaciousness and brightness of the Guild Rooms, the facilities of the library and for the little morning and afternoon teas we all enjoyed together’. In turn the WTG leaders, most of whom held senior positions in city schools, welcomed her and commented favourably on her ‘extraordinarily smart and modish’ dress. Not only her fashionable clothes but also her presence in the Guild Rooms indicated her commitment to her women colleagues. Upon return to her school, the rural girl teacher was kept in touch with the latest fashions in winter footwear, that is ‘galoshes’, which were being worn by office girls in the city. ‘They were a great idea, ensuring absolute dryness of shoes and stockings and would be an excellent investment for you girls … on your unmade country roads’. Nevertheless, when the WTG took up ‘the issue of salaries of lower paid teachers, particularly those in the outback’, it represented the girl teacher’s commitment to the occupation as temporary. Rather than deploying a discourse of profession and arguing for salaries and avenues of promotion that were commensurate with those of men (for whom teaching was conceptualised as a life-long occupation) as it did in the case of women teachers in the city, the WTG’s case was conceptualised around the amelioration ‘of all the disabilities of [the girl teacher’s] work and living in such isolated places’. Whatever the common bonds of union between women teachers in the WTG, discourses of youth and femininity again combined with those of the country to construct the girl teacher as transient in the occupation.

Thus it seems that the modish girl teacher carried the torch of progress into her outback school and beyond in her daily work, extra-curricula activities, commitment to women colleagues and as she ‘did her bit for women’ generally in the interwar years. Constructed as a progressive teacher, she enlivened and enlightened her country students with her up-to-date methods and broad curriculum while maintaining her efficiency as indicated by her examination results. Her commitments to women and to girls positioned her as a loyal citizen and servant of the state. She supported her women colleagues not only by disrupting the traditional image of the schoolmarm with her flapper-like fashions and social conduct, in moderation of course, but also through her Union and Guild membership, albeit that her involvement was circumscribed by her location in the outback. Yet the spectre of transience hovered nearby, fashioning the rural teacher as a girl, rarely a woman, a girl who needed a wage that

86 Guild Chronicle, October 1939, p. 18.
87 Guild Chronicle, June 1939, p. 11.
88 Guild Chronicle, August 1940, pp. 13-14.
89 Guild Chronicle, June 1938, p. 10.
90 For comparison see Guild Chronicle, April 1939, p. 9 and June 1940, p. 16.
was commensurate with her current circumstances rather than her future. Sooner or later she would find her right mate and the right circumstance and achieve the ideal state of being. In essence, the rural girl teacher flirted with flapperdom and perhaps with progressive pedagogy in her outback school, but reached maturity in marriage in the interwar years.

Conclusion

Kathleen Weiler argues that accounts of women teachers’ work ‘need to be examined as constructs produced at specific historical moments, under particular circumstances with different audiences in mind’. When Phoebe Watson wrote the Country Corner column she demonstrated her understandings of the interwar years as a period of rapid social change in which teachers could take up a range of subject positions. Keeping her audience of young women in mind, Phoebe deployed contemporary discourses of youth and femininity to fashion the country teacher as a youthful, responsible, attractive and marriageable girl, certainly a transient, but also a progressive pedagogue, servant of the state and loyal woman citizen. She seemed particularly concerned to represent the country teacher positively as one who could negotiate a moderate balanced position in relation to contemporary understandings about women, youth, teachers and their work, and mass consumer culture. Several elements of Phoebe’s portrayal of the country teacher resonate with other research on women teachers. For example, Wendy Robinson’s study of the *The Woman Teacher’s World* in England demonstrates that its contributors were concerned to construct the woman teacher as youthful, attractive and responsible. Similarly, Jo-Anne Reid and Sylvia Martin’s research on beginning teachers in rural New South Wales identifies the country teacher as youthful and a progressive pedagogue. Weiler’s focus on the youthful American rural teacher’s engagement with the modern world also has parallels with her equivalent in the Country Corner column. Thus it seems that when Phoebe Watson fashioned the country teacher in South Australia she was calling upon some common if not dominant discourses pertaining to women teachers. Of further note is Phoebe’s strategic deployment of discourses of city and country. In order to construct the country teacher as youthful and responsible Phoebe suppressed negative meanings of the city as overcrowded, dangerous and generally corruptive of youth. Likewise the country can also function as a place of peace and relaxation but Phoebe did not register these understandings in her discussions of the country teacher, preferring instead to privilege loneliness and isolation as the dominant theme. However, much more work is required to explicate the functions of both city and country in constructing teachers and their work in a range of different locations in the interwar years. The likelihood these discourses will manifest differently among various groups of teachers and in other countries opens the possibility for future comparative studies that will lead to a more nuanced understanding of twentieth century teachers, country teachers and all.

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