THE SPINSTER TEACHER IN AUSTRALIA FROM THE 1870s TO THE 1960s

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The never-married single woman or 'spinster' has long been a contentious figure. The word 'spinster' originated as a professional appellation for female spinner but by the eighteenth century it had become the legal term for an unmarried woman, in the process gathering increasingly negative connotations and links with the already pejorative 'old maid'. The nomenclature of spinster also came to be associated more with middle class than working class single women. Indeed, two seminal texts on spinsters focus only on the former. Whether working class or middle class, recent research suggests that the presence of single women has disturbed the gender order. It is also the case that the image of the spinster has been aligned with that of the female teacher, at least from the advent of state-sponsored schooling. Weiler and Blount's research in the United States, along with Cavanagh's in Canada, and Oram, for example, in the United Kingdom, have outlined the shifting perceptions of spinster teachers from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. Continuing in this vein, this article focuses on the spinster teacher in Australia.

Beginning with the introduction of mass compulsory schooling legislation in the 1870s, and using age and marital status as key categories of social difference, this article provides an overview of issues surrounding the 'woman teacher' through to the postwar baby boom. It shows how women teachers were increasingly differentiated according to location (country and city) and level of schooling (kindergarten, primary and secondary), and it also casts them as somewhat threatening to the gender order. Firstly, the article describes the processes by which teaching in both city and country

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1 Editor's note: This article is based on Kay's Presidential address to the ANZHES Conference, Armidale, December 2006.

primary schools became normalised as single women or spinsters' work with the advent of mass compulsory schooling. Part two focuses on the turn of the twentieth century, a period in which anxieties about single women, so many of whom were teachers, coalesced around the figure of the 'new woman'. In this context I investigate what state school teaching might have meant for single women, be they unqualified 'girl teachers' in country schools or mature women whose qualifications and career paths brought them into city schools. The third section shows that the expansion of state schooling in the early twentieth century produced further differentiation of the 'teacher' as primary, kindergarten or secondary. Furthermore, in the interwar years new meanings of singleness for women were proposed by sexologists and psychologists, and spinster teachers became more stigmatised as women. Finally, I turn to the women who taught from the late 1930s into the postwar era. During this era married women were recruited from the periphery of the teaching workforce to become the linchpin of the state's attempts to resolve the ever increasing shortfall of teachers required to cope with the postwar baby boom and the expansion of state secondary schooling. From the late 1940s the marriage bars were gradually removed and teaching was reconstructed as married women's work. In this situation, I argue that the spinster teacher was condemned as an embittered woman and marginalised as a teacher. In essence, this article demonstrates the instability of the category 'woman teacher' in the first century of mass compulsory schooling.

Constructing the spinster teacher

Beginning in Victoria in 1872, the 'free, compulsory and secular' Education Acts were passed in most Australian states in the following thirty years. Highly centralised and bureaucratic Education Departments were established to oversee the workings of these Acts, and extensive building programs were commenced to put primary schools within reach of all white children, no matter how remote their location.6 Most colonies established two categories of schools in order to organise and staff the rapidly expanding state school systems. Those with less than twenty students were designated 'provisional', the nomenclature reflecting the supposedly temporary status of the category and the teacher. These one-room schools in sparsely populated regions were usually staffed by unqualified teachers, overwhelmingly young women, or as one inspector commented 'immature women and feeble men'.7 Not only was the provisional teacher understood to be young and female, but she was also conceptualised as a temporary employee who taught briefly prior to marriage. Her wage was based on the assumption that she needed sufficient income for immediate necessities such as accommodation, food and clothes. This was far from reality for many provisional teachers who barely subsisted in remote

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ork with the advent of the twentieth century, women were teachers, and I investigate what was happening in the world of the 'teacher' and how this shaped the career paths of women who taught in rural locations. Such was the numerical dominance of young women in provisional schools that the 'country teacher' and 'girl teacher' soon became synonymous.

Schools with more than twenty students were designated 'public' and they were usually located in the cities and more densely populated rural areas. It was the intention of most Education Departments that these primary schools be staffed by qualified teachers who had completed a pupil teacher apprenticeship and/or attended the newly established training colleges. Professional status was attributed to qualified teachers and by the end of the nineteenth century vertical career paths or 'service ladders' had been institutionalised in state school systems. Typically graduates began their careers as assistant teachers in country schools, and promotion was by seniority and merit, with the most highly qualified and experienced staff working their way into the largest city schools.

The recruiting and governing practices of the late nineteenth century educational state not only created contrasting profiles for country and city teachers but also strictly enforced gender differences. As far as qualified teachers were concerned, men's wages were based on the assumption that they were married household heads with sole responsibility for supporting a dependent wife and children, and indeed, this understanding was institutionalised across Australia by the 'Harvester family wage' judgment of 1907. Service ladders were conceptualised with men teachers in mind and their career paths were protected by regulations that excluded women from leadership positions in any but small country schools and a handful of girls departments in large city schools. The educational state was constructing a workforce in which men managed and women taught as their subordinates.

Qualified women teachers' salaries were based on the same assumptions as provisional teachers and their career paths were severely truncated. Although there was no marriage bar in the regulations of most nineteenth century Education Departments, women teachers customarily resigned when they married, although not always of their own volition, and by the early 1880s married women were being refused permanent employment as state school teachers. Thus the educational state was constructing teaching as work for married men and single women. In so doing it was deeply implicated in creating the woman teacher as spinster in the public imagination in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

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There was unprecedented public scrutiny of the new state school systems and their workforces, and much anxiety over the numbers and quality of men and women teachers. Record keeping was rigorous and extensive, and statistics soon revealed the numerical dominance of women at the training colleges and in provisional and public schools. Places were reserved for male recruits at training colleges but Education Departments experienced great difficulty in attracting and retaining men after graduation. Indeed, 'until the 1970s all male applicants to teacher education scholarships in New South Wales were accepted on an aggregate up to sixty points lower than for women'. In contrast, Education Departments were inundated with applications from women to enter training colleges and teach in provisional and public schools, so much so that administrators could afford to be very selective about their social and educational qualifications. Whereas teaching would continue to be portrayed as a last resort for men, it was acknowledged that the occupation attracted 'a better type of women than men' well into the twentieth century.

Although teaching had been women's work within the family and across all school contexts throughout the nineteenth century, their increasing presence as waged workers in state school systems was conceptualised and criticised as the 'feminisation of teaching'. However, feminisation is a misnomer. Women had always been teachers but with the closure of small private schools because they could not compete with free state schools, and Catholic parish schools being taken over by women religious, thereby excluding men and women lay teachers, the state school system now became the primary site for women teachers' labour, and their work was exposed publicly in the statistics for the first time. In addition, 'single women performed so much of the work of teaching that the profession quickly became associated with them. A 'spinster' likely taught' in state schools by the end of the nineteenth century.

In sum, from the 1870s the free, compulsory and secular acts not only transformed the education landscape and ensured the dominance of state school systems, but they also did much to construct teaching workforces in which the vast majority of administrators were men, and women constituted seventy to eighty per cent of the teachers. Although few Education Departments actually formalised the marriage bar until the 1920s and 1930s, state school teaching had become the province of married men and single women by the early 1900s. In 1906 the Sydney Morning Herald reported that the question of women teachers' marital status 'is being much discussed on the Continent'. It also

15 Advertiser, 6 December 1933.
17 Blount, Fit to Teach, p. 45.
pointed out that 'celibacy or otherwise of teaching staff did not arouse much comment until women began to dominate'. The remainder of this article will show that such was also the case in Australia.

**The spinster teacher as 'new woman'**

For the generation of young single women who began teaching at the turn of the twentieth century, state school teaching was relatively a secure paid work that fostered their public visibility. Depending on their qualifications, they had access to clearly defined but limited career paths. Provisional teachers like Elsie Birks had the 'whole responsibility' for her one-room school in 1895 but she noted, 'there is a certain safe feeling of being well hedged in with rules, regulations and prescribed subjects to be taught'. These young women not only experienced relative autonomy in their daily work but were also important members of small rural communities. Ironically the most qualified and successful women teachers were unlikely to experience the whole responsibility for a school for they spent their days teaching large classes in city schools under the watchful eyes of headmasters.

However, teaching in the capital cities, especially, facilitated their access to social and political networks. There were Women Teachers Associations affiliated with teachers' unions in many states and women teachers were also activists in the major suffrage and post-suffrage organisations of the time. Such commitments 'conferred on women, if not in reality then at least potentially, a public presence and economic independence which flouted all traditional norms of women's place in the family households of their fathers and husbands'.

Whatever their school context, women teachers' tenure was contingent on them remaining single. However, opting to marry and leave paid work was not an easy choice at the turn of the twentieth century. Firstly, women teachers were respected publicly as their work provided a valuable service to their communities. Teaching also fostered a strong sense of self-worth. According to one commentator, 'the position of mistress in a school gives them the liberty they so ardently crave for'. Of equal importance was that teaching provided them with sufficient income and also security in the form of pension funds to make marriage a choice rather than an economic necessity. With the financial imperative removed, companionate marriage became the ideal. Blount argues that 'women generally believed that to marry, they first needed to love their partner and find satisfaction in the quality of the relationship'. In its absence remaining single was an acceptable option. Elsie Birks said as much when she resigned to marry at the age of twenty-five, the ideal age of marriage. Women were still considered to be marriageable

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19 Sydney Morning Herald, 7 February 1906, p. 5.
20 E. Birks (n.d.), Letters and Reminiscences, D2861(L), Mortlock Library of South Australiana.
23 Observer, 1 September 1888.
24 Blount, *Fit to Teach*, p. 61.
into their thirties, but beyond thirty-five they were deemed to be confirmed spinsters.25
Given the career paths in state school systems, women who chose teaching over marriage,
that is the spinster teachers, were more likely to be found in city schools.

For well-educated middle class women such as teachers, singleness which carried
with it the presumption of celibacy, could be conceptualised as a positive life choice
during this era.26 As Cavanagh notes, ‘celibacy provided women with personal power
in their lives, opened choice and opportunities for mobility otherwise denied them, and
fuelled ambitions which could have been constrained by marriage’.27 However, Hill argues
that ‘because they were outside marriage and so outside the control of husbands single
women were seen as an anomalous minority and were resented by men whose control
they had escaped’.28 From the perspective of one male teacher unionist the forty-four
year old spinster teacher and feminist, Phebe Watson, was a challenge to patriarchy:

Miss Watson does not seek the limelight, but she wields a fine influence ...
In union matters she chooses to be the head, than the hands or the voice.
She is not without a fine subtlety. She knows when it is her move, and she
always plays a fine game. I have heard men grumble about her measure who
really should have kicked themselves for not having wit enough to compete
with her.29

Phebe Watson and her spinster teacher colleagues’ independence generated a mixture of
uneasiness and respect in the early twentieth century.

The situation of women teachers is indicative of much broader societal changes.
From the 1870s there was a significant increase in the numbers of single women in
the paid workforce. The statistics revealed an increasing age at marriage, a declining
birthrate, and an increasing proportion of women never marrying.30 Furthermore, the
numbers of single women were increasing at a time when there was a great concern
about the declining birthrate, racial purity and a growing fascination with eugenics.31
Of particular concern were the numbers of middle class women who seemed disinclined
to marry and reproduce, preferring instead to remain in paid work, live separately from
their families and participate in a host of other public activities. By the late nineteenth
century the term ‘new woman’ had been coined to describe this cohort of well-educated,
socially and economically independent women. The figure of the new woman was complex
and contradictory.32 She was likely to be single, though not always, and she could be any
age. For example, on her eightieth birthday in 1905 Catherine Helen Spence announced

25 K. Whitehead, ‘Concerning images of women in government offices in the early twentieth century: what
26 Holmes, ‘Spinsters indispensable’, pp. 68-90.
28 Hill, Women Alone, p. 2.
29 SA Teachers Journal, September 1920, p. 45.
30 C. Bacchi, “The ‘Woman Question’” in E. Richards (ed.), The Flinders History of South Australia: social
31 Holmes, ‘Spinsters indispensable’, p. 78.
woman in fin-de-siecle France, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002; Israel, Bachelor Girl.
I am a New Woman, and I know it'. New women favoured dress reform and were often pictured riding that contemporary symbol of freedom, the bicycle. Many were political activists but as suffrage movements gathered momentum backlash also brewed against those who were outside the institution of marriage. Newspapers such as the *Bulletin* conducted vicious campaigns against new women while feminist newspapers such as the *Woman Voter* 'made out a very attractive case for women adopting spinsterhood'.

Roberts argues that in the midst of so many societal changes such 'discursive fixation on the New Woman serves as a measure of her threat, as well as of the importance of gender norms to bourgeois culture'.

Teachers, the largest and most visible group of women in professional employment, were identified as the vanguard of new women. Working alongside married men and standing in stark contrast to their wives, women teachers unsettled patriarchal governance in their day-to-day work and political and social activity. Furthermore, significant numbers spent long periods as waged workers before marrying while others never married, seemingly rejecting men, marriage, and maternity. The last mentioned was an especially significant threat because teachers, as well-educated middle class women were perceived to not only be rejecting patriarchy but also contributing to the demise of the white race. In effect, women teachers as new women were disrupting the gender order in their work and in their private lives. The anxieties thus generated were writ large in the controversy surrounding the appointment of Australia’s first woman inspector of state schools.

Following the achievement of women’s suffrage in South Australia in 1894, the pro-suffrage Minister of Education, John Cockburn, was keen to appoint a female inspector and when three vacancies arose he announced that one position would be allocated to a woman. City headmasters vehemently opposed the proposal in a deputation to Cockburn and at a special union meeting. Amidst a heated debate with women teachers one headmaster revealed the crux of men’s opposition by saying that ‘headmasters did not like petticoat government and did not want to see the new women come along’. Men’s anxieties were also registered in a satirical cartoon in the *Quiz and Lantern*. Several caricatures of women teachers were used in this full page spread entitled ‘That Lady Inspector’. The central frame showed a stereotypical ‘schoolma’am with stern visage, threepenny knot of tight hair and a cane in hand’ struggling to punish a small boy. This image captured the increasing unease about women as teachers of boys, the so-called ‘Woman Peril’ in the United States where the feminisation rates were higher than Australia. Blount argues that critics ‘did not just fear that boys were becoming effeminate, but

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37 South Australian Government Gazette, 7 January 1897, p. 3.
38 *Register*, 21 January 1897.
39 *Quiz and Lantern*, 28 January 1897.
40 *SA Teachers Journal*, February 1923, p. 411.
also at a more fundamental level they worried that the public regarded male educators as effeminate because they practiced a profession thoroughly reconfigured as women's work.\(^{41}\) Thus there was also an image of a grotesque, dominating schoolmarm chastising a male teacher for not sweeping his classroom, at the same time calling his virility into question. Here was the unthinkable petticoat government - a woman in a position of authority over a man. Another caricature portrayed the Minister of Education using a chair to defend himself against the scholarly bluestocking teacher with her trademark pince-nez, pointy nose and umbrella. The fashionably-dressed new woman teacher was pictured travelling on a bicycle to visit schools in the country. There was also the suggestion that it would be less contentious to appoint an 'Inspector of Patents' rather than a state school inspector. The final frame suggested that such an appointment was futile as it would be truncated by the ultimate symbol of women's containment, namely the inspector's marriage to one of the headmasters. Neither the cartoon nor the earlier protestations had any effect on the Minister of Education and in March 1897 thirty-seven year old spinster teacher, Blanche McNamara, became Australia's first female state school inspector.

In essence, for women who taught in state schools at the turn of the twentieth century teaching was a respected occupation that provided them with a measure of social and economic independence. Marriage thus became a matter of choice rather than an economic necessity. The majority of women teachers did embrace hegemonic femininity by marrying and leaving paid work but significant numbers did not and for these spinsters teaching became their career. Although there was unease about new women, the spinster teacher was mostly respected during this era for her valuable public work and her decision not to use marriage as a mere meal-ticket. From about the 1920s, however, she would be constructed as an increasingly problematic woman and then marginalised as a teacher.

**The spinster teacher as 'unmarriageable' woman**

While the free, compulsory and secular education acts in most states had originally concentrated on primary schooling, one of the most significant changes in education in the early twentieth century was the extension of state school provision above and below the ages of compulsion.\(^ {42}\) This process constructed new categories of teachers. Kindergarten classes were universally seen as women's work. In 1922 it was said that the kindergarten teacher 'should have a true love for children and a keen desire for their welfare'.\(^ {43}\) Grading students on the basis of age was now the normal pattern of primary school organisation, and being reinforced by experts such as G. Stanley Hall whose work on the construction of 'adolescence' was well-known in Australia. Various forms of state secondary schooling were being established to regulate working class adolescents and supervise their transition into blue collar jobs, and to prepare middle class students for white collar professions.\(^ {44}\)

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41 Blount, *Fit to Teach*, p. 13.
As far as middle class girls were concerned, it was claimed that ‘those who go into High Schools are a distinct type. When they enroll it is with the serious intention of becoming teachers, entering the University, or qualifying for a superior career of some kind’. The scholarly bluestocking with her university qualification was reconfigured as a secondary teacher whereas most primary teachers continued to be trained at teachers colleges where the focus was more on the ‘art and science of teaching’. Notwithstanding this diversification and fragmentation, women teachers shared the status of spinster as the marriage bars became formalised in the regulations and rigidly enacted, especially in the economic depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Age-grading was indicative of an increased focus on age as a marker of difference in society more generally. In the early twentieth century clear distinctions emerged between childhood as a period of dependence, youth as a time of independence and adulthood which was associated with family responsibilities. With age increasingly being used to group people, the 1920s saw the incarnation of the young woman as a ‘flapper’. Whereas the new woman was of indeterminate age, the flapper was emblematic of female youth, so much so that in Britain the 1918-1928 campaign to grant suffrage to women under thirty was known as the ‘flapper vote’. Typically a flapper worked in a city office and was preoccupied with fashions, leisure and peer relationships. The emerging advertising industry urged her to bob her hair, wear make-up and dresses that enhanced her attractiveness to men. She spent her leisure time among friends of both sexes, dancing and attending movies, and working through relationships. Romance was integral to the flapper’s life but ‘women’s access to sexuality was ordered within and around the institution of marriage’. Stanley Hall argued, for example, that ‘all of the above are only surface phenomena, and that the real girl beneath them is but little changed’, finding fulfillment in marriage and motherhood.

Young women teachers were not immune to these discourses about female youth and while the flapper gradually faded from the public imagination in the 1930s, her preoccupation with fashion, leisure and relationships remained indicative of youthful femininity. The mostly young women teachers who taught in the country were often referred to as ‘girl teachers’ and as such they were advised that ‘the bright, alert, well-dressed girl’ demonstrated ‘good taste’ to her students. The girl teacher was also told that ‘modern dancing was a fine way to promote social intercourse and physical recreation’.44

45 The Australian Women’s Weekly, 9 December 1933, p. 3.
51 Stanley Hall, Flapper Americana Novissima’, p. 766.
It had the additional benefit of mediating the image of spinster teachers as 'a censoring disapproving band ... the repressors of fun and jollity'. The problem was that there were limited opportunities for country teachers in remote rural communities to participate in social activities and find companionship with people of similar age. Thus they were encouraged to return to the city, the world of the flapper, for their holidays.

For women who had passed through youth and remained unmarried, there lurked the image of the spinster, and in the interwar years negative stereotypes were problematised afresh by the new sciences of sexology and psychology. Whereas previous understandings of hegemonic femininity assumed sexual indifference, these sciences focused on female sexuality and promoted heterosexuality within marriage as essential to women's health and happiness. Women were encouraged to dress and behave in ways that made them attractive to potential husbands, but once they had passed beyond the age of marriage they were regarded suspiciously. Indeed, the celibate woman was less likely to be respected for her independence and commitment to public work and more likely to be seen as an unfulfilled woman.

Sexology and psychology also categorised lesbian sexuality for the first time and created an ambiguous overlap with spinsterhood. Now that the sexual instinct was identified in every woman, the deviant categories of spinster and lesbian could easily be confused, and female friendship increasingly came into question.

Living arrangements which had formerly been accepted and respected, for example sharing a house with another woman, now came under suspicion, as did life-long companionship with one woman. Rupp argues that, nevertheless, most women who lived in couple relationships managed to do so respectably, despite the emergence of lesbian culture and the occasional charges of lesbianism. This was because they worked independently in professional jobs, had the money to buy homes together and enjoyed enough status to be beyond reproach in the world in which they moved.

The spinster teacher, of course, had always been presumed to be celibate but now that condition became a contentious matter and the earlier 'permission' to remain single in the absence of companionate marriage was gradually undermined. Women teachers in general had to contend with recurring images of the 'dowdily-dressed', 'old school ma'am type of teacher' who had failed in the business of marriage. Teachers' friendships with other women came under increasing scrutiny in films and fiction, serving to both reflect and fuel the negative stereotypes. As Oram notes, 'the increasing interwar emphasis on the [reputed] psychological problems of the 'unfulfilled spinster' added to the already difficult

54 Whitehead, 'Fashioning the country teacher', pp. 5-8.
56 Oram, "To cook dinners with love in them?" p. 99.
58 News, 3 December 1923, p. 5.
choices about marriage and created particular pressures for these women teachers who remained single. Women teachers who married were placed beyond suspicion but those who remained outside the institution continued to stand as threats to men, economically, politically and now in terms of their deviant sexuality.

Although the spinster teacher’s sexuality was constructed as an issue by the discourses of sexology and psychology, her capability as a teacher was not drawn into question in the interwar era. However, psychology was entwined with progressive ideals in education. Progressive teachers were expected to focus on individual students and arouse their interests and mental activity through their personality as well as their pedagogy. According to the South Australian course of instruction, personality was the key to successful classroom practice: ‘On his personality and character much more will depend than on his method of teaching’.

Progressive teaching was said to require much energy, zeal and enthusiasm on the part of teachers but it exposed them to a condition called ‘strain’ in the interwar years. Furthermore, ‘the measure of individual attention [to students] for which modern ideas call’ was said to play into the problem of strain. One woman teacher argued that ‘very few people outside the teaching service realise the enervating strain to which teachers are subjected... and it is perfectly true that for the worthwhile teacher, the end of the day sees “the virtue gone out of them”’.

Women teachers addressed the problem of strain politically through the teachers unions. They conducted campaigns for improved conditions including reduced class sizes and workloads, and salaries and career paths that were commensurate with men’s. In these negotiations they emphasized that it was the best and most conscientious teachers, not the ‘shirkers’ who were most susceptible to strain. While they focused mostly on their material conditions, they also speculated about the possible long-term impact of ‘strain’. Teaching, they contended, left women’s faces ‘strained, set and prematurely aged’. With the discourse of youthful femininity being constructed around heterosexual desirability, premature aging decreased women teachers’ attractiveness to men. In effect, the strain associated with modern teaching jeopardised women teachers’ matrimonial prospects.

In 1933 this problem was addressed in The Australian Women’s Weekly:

Although a teacher’s hours are shorter than those of a business girl, her work calls for the expenditure of much more vital energy. A good teacher is rather like a good actress who by sheer force of personality “puts across” an unpopular play. At the end of the day the teacher is drained of vitality, and even if her spare time need not be spent in correction or preparation she is


60 Education Gazette, February 1917, p. 3.

61 Register, 27 August 1926.


64 Women Teachers Progressive League deputation re position of women teachers in the Education Department, GRG 18/2/1917/2040, p. 7, Correspondence files of the Education Department of South Australia, 1896-1950, State Records of South Australia (hereafter SRSA).
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commonly unfit for the give-and-take of general society. School teachers are not born old maids but have single blessedness thrust upon them.65 In the interwar era, therefore, teaching moved from being an occupation that provided women with choice about marriage to ‘a profession hopelessly damaging to their matrimonial prospects’.66

In essence, under the influence of the sciences of sexology and psychology, and entwined with discourses of age, there were significant shifts in the public perception of spinsterhood in the interwar years. While young women teachers had access to the discourses of youthful femininity, the emphasis on personality and progressive pedagogy as the foundations of good teaching reputedly increased their susceptibility to strain and premature aging and decreased their attractiveness to men. For those who remained unmarried, spinsterhood was stigmatised. Whereas early twentieth century spinster teachers could be represented as independent and valued for their public work, their counterparts in the 1920s and 1930s were vulnerable to being labelled as unfulfilled women. Nevertheless, while the occupation rendered them unmarried, their status as good teachers was upheld. Such would not be the case in the 1940s and 1950s.

The spinster teacher as ‘embittered’ woman

From the late 1930s into the postwar years there were further changes in the education landscape and equally important shifts in the demographic profile of state school teachers. The gradual phasing out of the one-room school as transport and roads improved meant that the girl teacher was more likely to be working under a headmaster’s supervision in a larger country school.67 Along with the continued protection of men’s privileged positions, the consolidation of rural schools and the expansion of secondary schooling reinforced the notion that men managed while women taught. For example, by 1969 only six per cent of women teachers in the South Australian Education Department were in leadership positions compared with thirty-one per cent of the men teachers.68 With secondary schooling becoming the norm for all students rather than the privileged few, there were more opportunities for women to choose secondary over primary teaching and the consolidation of differences between the two sectors. Theobald and Dwyer argue that women secondary teachers’ ‘sense of self was built around pride in scholarship, mastery of a discipline and consciousness of their status as university women who had proved themselves the intellectual equals of men’ whereas representations of primary teachers were more likely to be associated with the aforementioned progressive, child-centred discourses of good teaching.69

While marriage had always been regarded as ‘the greatest career for all women’70, its social significance gathered momentum during and after World War Two, and it became constructed as ‘the absolute norm’.71 In her letter of resignation one woman teacher who

65 The Australian Women’s Weekly, 24 June 1933, p. 3.
66 The Australian Women’s Weekly, 24 June 1933, p. 3.
67 Hyams et al., Learning and Other Things, pp. 219-221.
68 Miller, Long Division, p. 279.
69 Theobald and Dwyer, ‘An episode in feminist politics’, p. 60.
70 The Australian Women’s Weekly, June 1933, p. 7.
71 Israel, Bachelor Girl, p. 183.
was about to marry claimed that 'my life was designed for no other purpose'. Women married younger than they had in the depression years of the early 1930s, so much so that a twenty-five year old teacher commented that she 'would not desire so much to be married if she were not so old'.

Not only did the age of marriage decrease, but women had more children, more closely spaced, than the previous generation, and childrearing manuals drew on the psychological literature on child development to encourage them to centre their domestic life around children and husbands' needs. This literature prescribed a particular version of child-rearing, hence of mothering. Children required more than physical care. They also required social, emotional and cognitive care through developmentally organised activities that can facilitate their maturation.

Bowlby's work which soon became well known in Australia 'insisted on a mother's constant presence as essential for the infant's and small child's health'. In effect, there was relentless cultural pressure on women to marry and a reorientation and intensification of the discourse of mothering, and in this context the spinster became the nightmare alternative to hegemonic femininity.

Rosenthal argues that 'while much of the scholarly literature assumes that the rise of sexology was responsible for the derogation of women who remained unmarried, it was not until after World War Two that the most negative images of spinsters began to proliferate'. In the mid-twentieth century the spinster was represented as being plagued by psychological problems. Not only was she supposed to be unfulfilled, she was now seen to be outwardly resentful and 'bitter because the male sex had passed her by'.

'Embittered, sexless or homosexual', opined one British doctor. Marriage was constructed as the sole path to women's sexual and emotional fulfilment so 'only a man could provide the already unsteady, unmoored modern woman with moral balance'. However, the embittered spinster was seen to be beyond marriage, and thus male control.

It was not just that individual spinsters were threatening to men. The tendency to associate post-suffrage feminism with spinsterhood indicates that they also collectively challenged patriarchal power. Notwithstanding the fact that many of the leaders in the women's movement were married, the 'old, unattractive and manless feminist was a recurring theme'. Such were the tensions around spinsterhood and feminism that when some headmistresses were asked whether there was 'any indication of a growing tendency toward the feminist type' among their girl students, one answered 'No. All of them are normal and stable'. Another responded 'No feminists here as far as I know. They like to be independent but are essentially domesticated'. Not only did 'normal' girl students...
reject feminism but some also joined in the portrayal of their spinster teachers as old, unattractive and manless. For example, former students who were interviewed about Mary Hutton and her staff do not remember their scholarship as secondary teachers, their feminist activism or their contributions to state secondary education in metropolitan Melbourne. Instead memories of 'old maidish dresses'; emotional distance, severity and sarcasm are indicative that these students also conceptualised the spinster teacher as an embittered woman.83

While spinster teachers had long been an aberration and more or less threatening in society, they had been the norm in state schools since the late nineteenth century. During and after the Second World War, however, they were rapidly outnumbered by married women teachers as state school systems tried to cope with the baby boom. With the formalisation of the marriage bar in the previous era, married women had been reduced to the ignominious status of 'temporary teacher' on the minimum salary and with no access to career paths and pension funds. Now that 'temporary teachers' were essential to the functioning of state school systems the debates about their tenure began in earnest, the varying degrees of support and resistance in each system accounting for the different success rates in removing the marriage bar from the regulations.84

The arguments for and against married women's permanent employment were much the same across Australian state school systems. The affirmative case pointed out that the marriage bar denied women teachers the rights to full citizenship, was a waste of teachers' experience, and that children deserved the best teachers, married or single. Opponents canvassed many 'problems' with married women's employment. These included their lack of mobility, rates of absenteeism, 'divided loyalties' between home and school, the 'independence' that came with a two-income family, and finally that they might block the employment of young graduates.85

While the arguments from both sides were similar, the protagonists and opponents varied in different jurisdictions. In Western Australia and South Australia, for example, spinster teachers did not fully support their married colleagues, the South Australian Women Teachers' Guild (WTG) being a case in point. In 1941 the United Association of Women in New South Wales sought the WTG's support for its campaign to remove the marriage bar. The WTG asserted that its prime concern was for the spinster teacher and upheld the marriage bar for all of the reasons outlined above. It added that spinster teachers were being displaced from city schools and forced to transfer to the country to make way for married women teachers.86 In the early 1940s this was a significant issue. The Director explained to the WTG that staff shortages were such that 'the Education Department was in the hands of temporary teachers and had to accept them at their

84 Theobald and Dwyer, 'An episode in feminist politics', pp. 59-66.
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'less threatening throughout the century, outnumbered by the baby boom, women had been immum salary and ly teachers' were heir tenure began m accounting for lations.44 Employment were ive case pointed itizenship, was a chers, married or iplement. Theses would between hom lick of they

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own terms'.47 With the shortfalls rapidly increasing after the war, the displacement issue seemed to abate and the WTG subsequently resolved to support married women's rights to the same salaries, pension and promotion opportunities as spinsters, though it did not actively campaign for the removal of the marriage bar. As a consequence, the marriage bar was not removed until 1969 in the South Australian Education Department, compared with 1947 in New South Wales.48

The tensions surrounding married and spinster teachers not only related to their tenure in the occupation but ultimately to their capabilities as teachers. According to Willard Waller, an American sociologist of the era, the unmarriageable and embittered spinster 'spreads inferiority complexes about her in the classroom. The teacher whose attitude toward sex is not wholesome engenders a similar maladjustment in her students'.49 Given these understandings, Waller became an early advocate for married women teachers 'as it seems certain that married women are on the average more wholesome and normal than their unmarried sisters'.50 Having proved their heterosexuality, married women could 'offer desirable gender or sexual characteristics for their students to emulate'.51 Thus they could be considered better teachers than their spinster counterparts.

In the mid-twentieth century, spinster teachers were not only seen as inappropriate female role models for girls, but their capabilities as teachers were also called into question as constructions of good teaching shifted to focus on children's emotional development. Griffith and Smith state that 'the child development discourse is textually organised and conceptually linked to the discourse on child-centred education and to the discourse on mothering'.52 According to such understandings, married women teachers could form emotional bonds with children as on the basis of their experience as mothers they could understand them better. Thus the married woman teacher was seen to be better equipped to work with young children as well as girl students.53

While married women teachers could be criticised for neglecting their domestic duties or alternatively, their work, they had proved their engagement with discourses of hegemonic femininity by marrying and having children. This powerful subject position was not available to spinster teachers. With the renewed emphasis on marriage and motherhood that accompanied the postwar baby boom spinster teachers as both unmarriageable and embittered women were subject to increasing aspersions on their femininity and their capabilities as teachers. They countered such arguments using the idea of 'sublimation', contending that 'far from being dangerously repressed, their parental instincts and sexual drives were beneficially sublimated in their work to the good of themselves, their pupils and society as a whole'.54 This was not a particularly powerful subject position compared with hegemonic femininity. Indeed, spinster teachers

87 Director to Women Teachers Guild, GRG 18/2/1943/631, SRSA.
88 Miller, Long Division, p. 279.
89 Waller, Sociology of Teaching, p. 458.
90 Waller, Sociology of Teaching, p. 454.
91 Blount, Fit to Teach, p. 75; See also Cavanagh, 'Female-teacher gender and sexuality', pp. 247-273.
92 Griffith and Smith, Mothering for Schooling, p. 36.
93 Cavanagh, 'Female-teacher gender and sexuality', pp. 264-266; Oram, Feminist Teachers, p. 49.
94 Oram, "To cook dinners with love in them?" p. 106.
were doubly marginalised - as women and as teachers. Whereas in 1900 a spinster likely taught, in the postwar baby boom she was all but replaced by the married woman teacher, numerically and now tenured with the removal of the marriage bar.

Conclusion
This article has ranged across nearly a century of schooling in Australia, during which time the educational state played an important role firstly in producing the primary teacher, then the secondary and kindergarten teacher, along with country and city teacher. It was also intimately involved in constructing the woman teacher as spinster in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and then reconstructing her as a married woman in the mid-twentieth century. The figure of the spinster was not static but constantly shifting. This article has charted the significant shifts in perceptions of women teachers, locating them as new women in the early twentieth century and then showing how the sciences of psychology and sexology undermined their status as single women from the 1920s, and then their positions as teachers. At the same time the image of the spinster teacher consistently troubled the gender order. This article has also alluded to some more positive images. Younger women could call upon the discourses of youthful femininity at least until they passed beyond the age of marriage. There was also the child-centred progressive teacher and the scholarly secondary teacher. Nevertheless, the image of the spinster hovered over older single women. More empirical studies of how specific individuals and groups of older women teachers dealt with the image of the spinster teacher in different eras are now needed to complement this broad survey of the Australian scene.

Whether or not the image of the spinster continues to exist in the public imagination is a matter of speculation. Recent publications about single women, both historically and in contemporary times, claim that the spinster has all but vanished.\(^5\) Indeed, Hill wondered whether her study of spinsters in the past might be considered 'eccentric', given that they no longer form a distinct social category.\(^6\) Trimberger, however, argues that although the word 'spinster' has all but disappeared, its negative connotations remain.\(^7\) A recent article in the popular press denies the existence of the spinster in Australia but conceptualises the mature single woman as 'single minded', economically and socially independent. She can be found in a range of middle class occupations. Teaching, of course, is no longer the principal occupation of choice for middle class women. While the archetypal single woman is no longer a teacher, she 'continues to make the nation nervous'.\(^8\) Such statements suggest that the enigmatic spinster is not very far from the public imagination in contemporary Australia.

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In 1900 a spinster teacher, a city teacher. It is perhaps the last woman in the newly shifting teachers, locating how the sciences of the spinster teacher have become more positive. Even today, the spinster teacher is seen as an eccentric, given the advanced roles of the spinster teacher in different scenes. The public imagination of the spinster teacher is both historically rich and problematic. Indeed, Hill 's 'eccentric', given the status, argues that the spinster teacher remains in Australia but in a socially and historically different scene. Teaching, of course, is strongly gendered. Women often make the nation of the spinster teacher very far from the

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...thal, Spinster Tales, pp. 38-40.