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**“A FEMININE ENROLMENT”:  
Recovering Women Students of Massey Agricultural College  
1932-1963**



**A research essay presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honours in History at Massey University.**

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## CONTENTS

Acknowledgements  
Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Unsuitable for a Girl:</b> Getting to Massey	<b>9</b>
<b>So Much to Learn</b> Courses of study	<b>16</b>
<b>Outside the Classroom</b> Social life at Massey	<b>26</b>
<b>Eve into Eden</b> Being a woman student	<b>36</b>
<b>Educated Helpmates?</b> Leaving the College	<b>45</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>52</b>

Photograph front cover: Women students outside the glasshouse at Massey Agricultural College, 1950. Courtesy of Ila Edmond

## Introduction

Massey Agricultural College<sup>1</sup> is the forerunner of what is now Massey University, an institution spread across three cities competing with other New Zealand universities on an equal footing. Its modest and limited beginnings in the 1920s could not have anticipated the University today, most markedly that women students could equal, or even outnumber, men. The women students of the early College were a small and enigmatic group, hidden amongst the pages of archives. Tantalisingly a name is mentioned here and there. It is this largely overlooked group of women I hope to reveal to a degree - this 'feminine enrolment'<sup>2</sup>.

The purpose of this research is threefold. First, to reveal the kinds of women who would enter an agricultural college, juxtaposing them against the general expectations of women at the time to see if their experiences and aspirations differed from that of their peers. Second, to explore the College's attitudes to and expectation of these students. And, foremost, to give a voice to these 'others' at Massey Agricultural College, which was overwhelmingly a young, rural-male domain. Within the limits of this paper tentative insights will emerge into broader issues surrounding women's educational opportunities and practice and the significance of gender in society at the time.

While Massey College was a specialist educational institution one must look at a broad range of educational historiography. Research into education was limited until the advent of a more 'social' history in the 1950s, and studying women as a distinct group within education is a relatively recent occurrence. Prior to this period we have

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<sup>1</sup> Massey Agricultural College, Massey or 'the College' will be used to refer to the institution throughout this essay. With changes coming in the early sixties it was renamed Massey College in 1961 and became Massey University in 1963.

<sup>2</sup> *Dominion*, 2 November 1954.

some histories of institutions, particularly in the tertiary field, in very masculine and general tones<sup>3</sup>. Pronouns are almost exclusively male, and women students rarely mentioned. Given that 'equal' educational opportunities have always existed in New Zealand, one could justify a general record of education as encompassing both sexes. However New Zealand's educational history has a very strong gendered bias to it, with different expectations and attitudes based upon sex. Therefore, inclusive education history has effectively left women out until fairly recently.

With the second wave of feminism starting in the 1960s and the advent of 'women's history' we initially had the recovery of the early women graduates. Kate Edgar, New Zealand and the Commonwealth's first woman BA graduate, is an obligatory mention in all women-in-education histories. She pioneered the way that led to a peak of women as a proportion of all university students in the 1890s<sup>4</sup> (a figure not eclipsed until almost 90 years later). More recently we have seen education discussed and researched with gender at the forefront, emphasising its separate spheres nature. This emphasis has changed the perception of New Zealand's egalitarian education system to one that is seen to have been influenced by, and which influenced, the social norms of the time.

Knight and Hitchmen<sup>5</sup> considered that the initial peak of women's attendance at universities in the late 1890s reflected their status in wider society, coinciding with the era of the suffragists. They suggest that this demand for education was based on women's role as keepers of society's morals and was not a precursor of equal employment. The lowest point of women's attendance at tertiary institutions, in the 1950s, was during the re-construction of women as wives and mothers after the encouragement to move outside their homes during World War Two. The period of

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<sup>3</sup> Such as J.C. Beaglehole, *The University of New Zealand: an Historical Study*, New Zealand Council of Educational Research, 1937 and *Victoria University College*, Wellington: New Zealand University Press, 1949, and later ones such as W.J. Gardner, E.T. Beardsley, T.E. Carter, *A History of the University of Canterbury: 1873-1973*, Christchurch: University of Canterbury, 1973.

<sup>4</sup> *All About Women in New Zealand*, Wellington: Statistics New Zealand, December 1993. 39% of students were women in 1891. p.55.

<sup>5</sup> Stephanie Knight and Belinda Hitchmen, *Women at University: the Report on the position of Women Students at the University of Auckland*, Auckland: Auckland University Students' Association, 1988.

1945-60 is represented as one of retreat for women, both from the workforce and from higher education.<sup>6</sup> They consider there was an actual increase in numbers of women at university, but a decline in them as a proportion of the student body, though census figures suggest that the percentage of women employed and in tertiary education actually remained fairly stable.<sup>7</sup>

Shuker<sup>8</sup> has also studied schooling in New Zealand as a gender issue but expanded the argument to one in which women's unpaid domestic labour is socially necessary for the maintenance of the wage labour system. This gives credence to the notion of separate spheres in education for men and women, and girls' education, based on domestic femininity, played its part in the social construction of women.

Page<sup>9</sup> suggested in her work on the early Otago graduates that higher education gave women agency and a position of power. She supports McKinnon's Australian research, which suggests that women's tertiary education can be viewed as a dissent from men's control. While education offered limited employment opportunities for women it did present them with options and some economic advantages. Page argues that the fact that they married later and had fewer children on

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid* p.11.

<sup>7</sup> Census figures for the period 1936 -1962 suggest that the percentage of women employed remained at 18-19%. The general report of the 1961 census attributes a slight drop from 1945-51 to women leaving war time work and the slight rise in 1956-61 to the increase of married women in the work force. ('Industries and Occupations', p.3) Percentages were obtained by comparing the numbers of women actively engaged in employment against those not. Information from *Census* 1936, 1945, 1951, 1956 1961. Figures of women as a percentage of university students actually increases from an 18% low in 1947 to 23-24% throughout the fifties. The low in 1947 is attributed to rehabilitation bursaries for ex-servicemen inflating the male student population, not a decline in actual women student numbers. Information from *NZ Official Yearbook: 1947-49*, p.157; 1954, p.166; 1957, p.189; 1963, p.246, Dept. of Statistics, Wellington. Montgomerie, in 'Man-powering Women', would challenge the idea that women were encouraged to forego their maternal responsibilities during World War II and suggests that little change was effected. She considers the majority of women were either compelled to stay in positions already held, or were shifted within traditional women's jobs. Relatively few outside the work force were man-powered. Information from Deborah Montgomerie, 'Man-powering Women', in Barbara Brookes, Charlotte Macdonald and Margaret Tennant, eds, *Women in History 2: Essays on women in New Zealand*, Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1992. pp.184-204.

<sup>8</sup> Roy Shuker, *The One Best System?: a revisionist history of state schooling in New Zealand*, Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1987.

<sup>9</sup> Dorothy Page, 'The First Lady Graduates: Women with Degrees from Otago University 1885-1900' in Barbara Brookes, Charlotte MacDonald, Margaret Tennant, eds, *Women in History 2*, Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1992.

average gave them an increased bargaining position within marriage. She also explores the idea that higher education for women was widely accepted, particularly for teaching. Women as teachers were an ‘extension of the moral guidance a mother gave her family’<sup>10</sup>, and as girls’ schools proliferated women graduates were not competing against men for jobs. However, acceptance and tolerance within non-traditional areas, such as medicine and particularly law, was not easy for students and for those expecting a career.

In the history of women at Victoria University, Hughes and Ahern<sup>11</sup> ‘attempt to show how women’s experiences and aspirations at university were in part a reflection of their position in society and how conditions and assumptions changed over time’.<sup>12</sup> They see gender operating against the advancement of women in education. Society, and women themselves, valued their roles as wives and mothers. University students of both sexes internalised the social values of the times and acted accordingly. The women profiled in their book largely saw no signs of discrimination and ‘accepted the fact that men and women were different and behaved differently’.<sup>13</sup>

In the Select Committee on Women’s Rights report in 1975<sup>14</sup> the emphasis is once again upon gender shaping educational aspirations and opportunities. While there has never been any formal discrimination in higher education women have entered less frequently and into more limited areas than men. ‘The problem is not one of formal restriction but of the continuing influence of conventional attitudes to the role of women in society (that educational and training qualifications are less relevant, and, indeed, may be wasted) and, reflecting these attitudes, the tendency for them to limit the extent and nature of their schooling.’<sup>15</sup>

This ‘recovery’ of women students of Massey Agricultural College will build

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p.120.

<sup>11</sup> Beryl Hughes and Sheila Ahern, eds, *Redbrick and Bluestockings: Women at Victoria 1899-1993*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1993.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p.7.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, p.63.

<sup>14</sup> *The Role of Women in New Zealand Society. Report of the Select Committee on Women’s Rights: June 1975*, Wellington: A.R. Shearer, 1975.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, p.57.



upon the concept of New Zealand's gendered attitude to education, and also help to fill a gap in its historiography. Whereas earlier studies on women university students focus on older university colleges offering general as well as specialist degrees, Massey College, as an institution with an agricultural focus, was more obviously a 'male' domain.

The College was in existence between 1928-1963 and women first appeared as students in 1932. At the time separate spheres for women and men were seen as natural. General education for girls emphasised domestic and home life instruction in readiness for marriage, and society accepted the view of women in the home. Increasingly they were expected to work as a stopgap before marriage, but society, families and often women themselves limited their education and career choices.

The majority of these early Massey women were not graduates of a degree course so they do not conventionally fit within the traditional university system, or within traditional areas of education. Massey was outside the mainstream. The College grew out of New Zealand's agriculture-based economy, and its transformation in the 1960s was symptomatic of a changing economy and culture. Women entered a provincial, largely residential, masculine institution in a period of low attendance by women in tertiary education. By the sixties both women and the College were recognising a change of needs.

Into this scenario came the women students of Massey. For these women gender was not an obvious issue, but from today's historical perspective one can examine the extent to which gender influenced them and the College. They challenged society's expectations of them by making an active choice for a higher education and participation in a traditionally male dominated job market. My research has revealed that on the whole these women had extensive secondary schooling, strong women role models, expected to earn a living and had a desire to work within agriculture, all with family support. Gender shaped them and the College, but could be overridden to an extent.

There was never any bar to women entering the College as students in any

courses and one could say that, at an official level, their presence was actively welcomed. Professor Peren, the Principal, remarked in 1944 when women had arrived in greater numbers:

I am particularly pleased with the influence of the large number of women students. Their presence has undoubtedly a beneficial effect on the general behaviour of the men and produces what one can describe as a more balanced student outlook.<sup>16</sup>

But, like society, the authorities imagined women within a prescribed role and new courses were specifically designed. Agendas of preparing women for domesticity in jobs and the home and countering the drift from country to town were implicit in what was offered.

The change of direction of the College into what was to become Massey University in the early 1960s, was the end of an era in more ways than one. One can see shades of a new feminism appearing in the recollections of the later women students. It is unlikely that 'afternoon tea served by the Mog. girls'<sup>17</sup> at an Open Day in 1960 would have been accepted for much longer.

At one stage this sort of history would have been largely unrecoverable, but, with the accepted use of oral sources, photographic evidence and a careful reading of university documents (with attention to the silences), one can begin to reveal a past hitherto hidden. With the passage of time one can also see that some of these methods of recovery will be lost to us. For printed primary resources the Massey University Archives have proved invaluable and I mainly relied upon the Principal's reports, Council documents, College literature, newspaper clippings, and past student associations' minutes and publications. However, it is a group of women students that are the source of much of this inquiry. Found by advertisements and word of mouth nine women have been only too happy to recall and reminisce about their time as

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<sup>16</sup> Principal's Report, March 1944, council document, 1.2/1/1, Box 7, Massey University Archives (MUA)

<sup>17</sup> *Bleat*, Number (No.) 20, 1960, 4.1/2/2, Box 2, MUA, p.51. *Bleat* started in 1931 and was an annual publication put out by the Students' Association. Mog. is short for Moginie House, the women's hostel from 1944.

students 40-70 years ago<sup>18</sup>. Without them this study would have a completely different face. Oral interviews are an invaluable way to give a voice to these women who were pioneers in their way - for the right to choose a career that was not driven by social norms but was personally desired. Therefore this paper is built around the recollections and memories of some of that 'feminine enrolment'<sup>19</sup>.

### **The Background to Massey's Establishment**

New Zealand of the 1920s was affluent and agricultural. Its prosperity and development still lay in agriculture despite increasing urbanisation. Into this environment the College was born, built upon the two new Chairs of Agriculture developed at Auckland and Victoria universities. Accord between the universities and the two Professors appointed, Peren and Riddet, saw the amalgamation of the schools and the eventual unanimous recommendation that they combine, finally settling upon Palmerston North. Lincoln College, as a private institution, had long turned out practical farmers but Massey always envisaged itself foremost as an academic and research orientated institution. Parochial jealousies surfaced in the setting up of Massey but when Lincoln became Canterbury Agricultural College to all intents and purposes two sister Colleges were established along the same lines in 1927<sup>20</sup>. Lincoln may, however, have been hampered by its origins in the 1880s as Massey could be seen to lead the way in more innovative thinking from its inception.

The purchase of the old Batchelar farm at Fitzherbert and the gift of 'Turitea' from the people of Palmerston North saw the College prepare for a 1928 opening. Into a rural setting 85 male students arrived to study for various diplomas and the degree of Bachelor of Agricultural Science (BAGSc). Accommodation had to be found in

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<sup>18</sup> Five women were interviewed on tape and the remainder filled in a written questionnaire due to distance. Women are referred to by their married name in this essay, with maiden names bracketed in initial footnotes.

<sup>19</sup> *Dominion*, 2 November 1954.

<sup>20</sup> Information on Lincoln College from T.W.H. Brooking, *Massey, Its Early Years: A history of the development of Massey Agricultural College to 1943*, Palmerston North: Massey Alumni Association, 1977. Lincoln College was handed over to the government in 1927.

Palmerston North, and first year degree classes were to be taken at other universities.<sup>21</sup>

While wording in the first calendar makes the courses appear to be offered exclusively to men, it also pointedly contained a heading 'WOMEN STUDENTS', announcing that, 'Women students will be admitted to all courses'.<sup>22</sup> This was to be reflective of the College's thinking throughout its existence. Over the years it sought ways to encourage women students and anticipated their arrival in bigger numbers. However, while welcoming, the administration generally saw women students as fulfilling current societal roles. The views of the College's Chairman, Sir George Fowlds, of where women fitted in would be the basis for the encouragement of women at Massey throughout its years:

So far we have only had men as students, but the college with all its activities, is equally available for women, and we hope that soon they will be attending in large numbers. I hope the day is not far distant when we shall have a school of domestic science operating as part of the college to provide well educated helpmates for the future farmers of New Zealand, training in an institution breathing an agricultural atmosphere such as I am sure Massey Agricultural College will always do.<sup>23</sup>

The expectation was that Massey could help rural women waiting for marriage to a farmer prepare for that role. One may question then, whether the women themselves came to the College with this in mind.

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<sup>21</sup> Over the early years a campus developed with a specialised teaching block and hostel facilities, and the farm was extended and developed.

<sup>22</sup> Massey Agricultural College (MAC) Calendar of the Year 1928, MUA, p.11. This clause remained in the calendars of the College for its duration. Elsewhere the use of 'for men', 'men wishing to', 'sons of', prevailed.

<sup>23</sup> *Dominion*, 1 May 1931. This was mentioned in the address at the opening of the Main Building. Similar sentiments were mentioned in 1929 when the foundation stone was laid.

A feminine enrolment : recovering women students of Massey Agricultural College, 1932-1963 : a research essay presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts with Honours in History at Massey University

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