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Personal Life

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Portrait of Gwen Ridley

1930 Glen Riddle, Barraba, New South Wales

oil on canvas on board, 72.0 x 53.0 cm

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# Love and Freedom

*Professional Women and the Reshaping  
of Personal Life*

Alison Mackinnon

Institute for Social Research  
University of South Australia



**CAMBRIDGE**  
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*For Malcolm*

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## Preface

I BEGAN MY CAREER BY CHANCE, like many women of my generation. I had not planned for it, having grown up in the 1950s expecting marriage, motherhood, perhaps some schoolteaching, to provide fulfilment. Indeed I became equipped with the accoutrements of family life: three small children, a large house in the process of renovation, a Labrador dog, a cat and an unkempt garden. Those chaotic elements were shared with a partner forging a successful career, a career which we both tacitly agreed was, after the children, the central focus of our joint endeavours. But when two of our three children had started school I decided to return to academic life. I began work as a full-time university tutor, a position which involved teaching undergraduate classes, marking student papers and counselling the laggardly and anxious. As well, I was to complete a higher degree.

I approached the university with immense gratitude, for it offered release from suburbia. There was also trepidation as to my intellectual preparedness, and excitement in anticipation of stimulating discourse and leisurely lunches where the existential and metaphysical dilemmas of the day might be explored. Of these delights I was soon disabused. Common



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room talk was as likely to focus on football as on theory, and the idea of leisurely lunches rapidly faded with the pressures of completing work in the few hours between dropping children at school, ensuring childcare for the youngest and planning dinner. It soon became apparent that any thinking work was to be done in the hours after the children were asleep, a situation which did not interrupt the pattern of domestic life as my partner was equally likely to be poring over books or journals.

A pattern was established in those frantic early days which has lasted for almost eighteen years. Now the children are grown, the Labrador and the cat dead, the garden overgrown and evenings still spent with journals and word-processors. But the woman who naively started out on her academic quest has irrevocably changed. Even more committed to the elusive life of the mind, I have had to come to terms with the fact that for women there are always extra obstacles to its achievement, that the cards are in many ways stacked through starting late, through having our thoughts fragmented by myriad household concerns. In coming to that realisation, one that is common to many women who seek to practise a profession, I have had to rewrite myself and in the process 'reinvent' myself and my marriage.<sup>1</sup>

Along the way, teaching the history of education, I became fascinated with the lives of the first generations of women who tackled that momentous leap into professional life. Who were the women who first attended those institutions established for men, the universities? What impelled them to undertake such new ventures? And how did the first women doctors, lawyers, university teachers, schoolteachers, writers manage their lives? After all, they took massive risks, facing rejection, ridicule and professional disappointments. Transgressing conventional expectations in fundamental ways, how did they find partners for life, produce children, use the talents that had been hard won? How had they reshaped the social institutions that constrained them – marriage, sexuality, family – in order to accommodate the new aspects of their lives? How had they reinvented themselves in ways that made it easier for us to follow?

This book is an exploration of the personal lives of professional women who undertook the radical step of advanced education in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. It is centrally concerned with the reshaping of personal life, a concern at the

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heart of women's lives today. But the narratives of these early professional women are part of a larger story, the historic decline in the birthrate which occurred at much the same time. In their life choices they symbolised all that their contemporaries feared about social change. They often rejected marriage, many preferring to share their lives with women; they were in the forefront of challenges to conventional marriage and to conjugal rights and they appeared to advocate birth control. They were explicitly concerned with social and sexual autonomy. Their quest for self-determination was a critical phase, a major shift in bargaining power between men and women.

Changing power between men and women is central to fertility decline but is often unacknowledged as such. To make the link between the two explicit, I have told the stories of professional women parallel to the story of fertility decline, the major social transformation termed the demographic transition in the turn-of-the-century Anglophone West. In order to enter several current debates I have assumed different voices: sometimes that of the feminist or cultural historian, sometimes the social scientist, dealing with statistics in a broader context. In the last twenty years the discipline of history has been swept by several currents including the new social history, quantitative history ('the historian as programmer'), the linguistic turn, and the 'new' narrative history. I borrow freely from all of these – as well as from demography and feminist theory – and move between the private and the public, the personal and the aggregate, the household and the state, blurring those boundaries and categories as the women in this book so manifestly did.

If we hope to understand such massive social shifts as demographic change we must be prepared to cross, indeed dissolve, disciplinary boundaries. We must bring to it a feminist perspective, one which acknowledges that relations between men and women are unstable and contested, that power is wielded and resisted, that decisions about sexuality and reproduction change in relation to wider social change, that changes in women's lives will inevitably make an impact on reproduction.

This book is the first to bring together the entrance into professional life of highly educated women and the question of the declining birthrate. In so doing it contributes to the debate on the demographic transition. It

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marries the personal with the statistical, suggesting that behind such bland and apparently scientific terms such as 'fertility decline' lie countless decisions, negotiations and personal struggles between men and women. Thus it is centrally concerned with changing relations between the sexes. Through the stories of the first women who gained entrance into universities and the professions it generates insights into the ways in which some women gained greater freedom, more bargaining power in their lives, and greater control over their reproductive capacity. Through letters and diaries, through student newspapers and club records, subjectivities can be traced; through routinely generated statistical records, the collectivity emerges. Viewing both demographic statistics and literary material as texts facilitates the merging of the work of demographer and social historian.

Overall we can map the emerging changes in women's sense of themselves as they used their new-found skills to challenge prevailing conceptions of women's rightful place, to construct a multiplicity of possibilities. In particular we see their challenge to marriage as it was then constituted. Some attempted to change the terms on which it was contracted. Others were willing to forgo unwelcome bonds in order to pursue a respected independence. We can reject the notion that there were only two alternatives available to women: marriage or spinsterhood. Such a categorisation works to obscure the lives of the many women who chose to establish households with other women, opening a space for new ways of living and working. For women-identified women, there was less tension between love and freedom – freedom in the sense of acting autonomously in the professional world. In the domain of heterosexual relations the combination was to be a long time in the making. Why, we ask, are we still struggling with expressed oppositions of love and freedom, career or family, 'working mother' or homemaker?

This book sets out to be more than an exercise of historical imagination. In reading the letters and writing of women struggling to make meanings of their lives we examine our own lives, create our own meanings, continually reshape our own futures. In the years of researching and writing I have been forced to explore the conflict in my own life between love and freedom, between autonomy and commitment. I have

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shared the process with friends in Australia and overseas. I have achieved moments of fragile peace, but no continuing resolution to the conflicting claims of love and freedom. In this postmodern world such a question has become harder, almost impossible to ask. But in reading the works of feminist historians, literary theorists and philosophers I still find the issues women face arranged in myriad clusters around this unfashionable opposition. They may be expressed in other terms; they may be complicated by claims of difference among women, of post-colonial doubts and multiple subjectivities. But the question of how to live life to the full as a woman, as an active and desiring subject, remains central. Perhaps the next generation now entering adulthood will finally manage to combine those two seductive but elusive goals – love and freedom.

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*Adelaide*

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*I saw a woman sleeping. In her sleep she dreamt Life stood before her, and held in each hand a gift – in the one Love, in the other Freedom. And she said to the woman, 'Choose!'*

*And the woman waited long and she said, 'Freedom!'*

*And Life said, 'Thou hast well chosen. If thou hadst said, "Love," I would have given thee that thou didst ask for; and I would have gone from thee, and returned to thee no more. Now, the day will come when I shall return. In that day I shall bear both gifts in one hand'.*

*I heard the woman laugh in her sleep.*

– Olive Schreiner, 'Life's Gifts',  
in *Dreams*, T. Fisher Unwin, London 1895 (7th edn), pp. 115–16.