

Margaret Bailey: Pioneering Headmistress of Ascham School

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Full-length biographies of Australian female school principals, whether of private or more especially of public schools, are rare, so any addition to this small but growing literature is to be warmly welcomed. Furthermore, this biography of Margaret Bailey (1879-1955) is important to the Australian history of education because Bailey not only led one of the most influential private girls' schools in New South Wales for 32 years, from 1914 to 1946, but also because she was an educational pioneer. Bailey adapted a form of education in the Dalton Plan that has been operational albeit in modified form at Ascham from its introduction in 1922 until today. This made, and still makes, Ascham distinctive in the competitive private school market in Australia.

Ascham, a private non-denominational school for girls established in Sydney in 1886, has been comparatively well served with written histories. These include a 1952 history by ex-Student Monica Flower, the large format publication *Ascham Remembered*, published in 1986, and the intriguing little biography of the first Ascham Principal, Marie Wallis, by former school Archivist Gerri Nicholas in 2007. The *Australian Dictionary of Biography* also carries an entry on Bailey by her niece Margaret Lundie, alongside entries of other Ascham Headmistresses, Amy Roseby, Merrilie Roberts and Dorothy Whitehead. This full-length biography by Jane Gilmore, however, covers a seminal period of the school's existence during Margaret Bailey's ownership and stewardship of the school. Bailey is credited with placing the school on a firm footing, expanding its scope and facilities and introducing a progressive form of education in the Dalton Plan.

In terms of biographical approach, *Margaret Bailey: Pioneering Headmistress of Ascham School* fits the first of the five types of educational biography outlined by Kridel (2008), namely the scholarly chronicle. The book is organised into ten roughly chronological chapters. The first two launch the story of its protagonist, starting with her family's emigration from Northern Ireland to their establishment in Toowoomba, Queensland. Gilmore shows that there were significant influences arising from Bailey's girlhood around her Presbyterian faith, the value of scripture and the possibilities opened up by education for girls at the end of the nineteenth century. Being the eldest child in a family of five, Bailey's education occurred first in the local state primary school followed by her attendance at the Newnham School for Girls, established in 1889. No doubt her experience at this academic private school owned and run by two Englishwomen, where she excelled, conditioned Bailey to think in terms of private secondary schooling for girls. With an Exhibition in hand in 1897, Margaret Bailey then attended the University of Sydney. Following the award of her degree in 1900, primarily in languages, she went teaching at the Rockhampton Girls Grammar School under the pioneering headship of Helen Downs who figures as an influence in the stories of many private school principals of the era. The next two chapters chart the history of Ascham



from its establishment, and its acquisition by Bailey and Kathleen Gilman Jones in 1914, the latter leaving the partnership shortly afterwards. The experience of the war years is covered in the fourth chapter.

Appropriately, since it is so important in Bailey's educational story and in that of Ascham itself, Gilmore then devotes the fifth chapter to a discussion of the background, educational features and introduction of the Dalton Plan. The Plan, developed by American Helen Parkhurst, is based on three principles: freedom, cooperation and assignments. While it has been modified to accommodate the strictures imposed by compliance to external regulation and examinations, Ascham has retained the subject classes, study periods and weekly subject assignments to which students must apply themselves in dedicated subject classrooms, alone and in group settings.

The final four chapters examine the ways in which Bailey led her school and expanded its resources and capacity through shrewd management and acquisition of neighbouring properties. As she neared retirement, Margaret Bailey ensured the continuation of her vision by selling the school, which was already financially viable and highly regarded, to a limited company incorporated as "Ascham School Limited", with a Board of Governors in 1937. Bailey continued to lead the school until just after the Second World War.

This is a fine biography, widely researched and engagingly written. It is carefully referenced and has a very useful list of references as well as a full Index. One of its great strengths, in the absence of many personal records of Margaret Bailey, is in its careful attention to context and to its presentation of numerous sketches of people important in Bailey's career and more generally to women's history in the early to mid-twentieth century. The Author, Jane Gilmore, who is Margaret Bailey's great niece, did not herself attend Ascham. Her position as the familial insider and school outsider allowed her to possess at once unique access to family records, narrative inheritance and memories, including her own, while having an outsider's vantage in reading the school record about her great aunt as principal and business woman.

American Biographer Cassuto (2006) divided biography into two main types: those presenting either "the silhouette" or "the secret self" of a subject. While Gilmore was unable to achieve an understanding of Margaret Bailey as a private person, she goes much further than a silhouette portrayal in revealing the public person, colouring in Bailey's undoubted strengths as a tireless school leader and educator of girls. Gilmore's conclusion is "that Ascham really did define Margaret Bailey's life" and that "what emerged is a woman who was first and foremost a teacher and a Headmistress" (p. 148). Educational historians and those interested in women's history will welcome Jane Gilmore's devoted endeavours to bring Margaret Bailey's educational life into fuller focus even if her subject's secret self remains shyly out of view.

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