The Canadians identified as a group in a way most convicts would not have experienced. They had the camaraderie and sense of solidarity born of rebellion. Yet even they suffered demoralisation and their unity began to fragment, indicating the pressures of convict experience. This is a valid point, and may challenge some of Nicholas et al’s conclusions, but is not central to her argument. She prefers to emphasise their longing to be reunited with family and friends, in contrast to other studies such as Rudé and Nicholas, who found that forty percent had less settled lives. But Boissery is not consistent and clear about which argument she is making. She seems simply concerned to add the ‘humanity’ of the convicts to this statistical picture.

Lastly, the structure of the book. Chapters begin with fictionalised accounts of events which do not fit into the narrative easily. Their purpose, she says, is to encourage the general reader to keep going. If a narrative needs such a gimmick to entice the reader along, perhaps its teller should think again.

In fact, as a detailed and painstaking look at the prosecution and defence of the Canadians, the story succeeds, if somewhat ploddingly. For an account of how this particular group of men – from industrious backgrounds and leaving behind solid families – reacted to the barbarities of incarceration and the privations of a new colony, the story is tantalisingly short. My appetite for their side of the story had just been whetted when I turned the page and found Lepailleur back on a ship to New York. Boissery’s foray into historiography in the final chapter is anything but conclusive, adding little to the story.

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Marjorie Theobald, Knowing Women: Origins of Women’s Education in Nineteenth-Century Australia, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996. 304 pp. $34.95 paperback, $90.00 hardback.

At first glance, ‘Knowing Women’ seems to belong to that genre of books to which one would refer only if a person of interest were mentioned in the index. Indeed, this was the first use I made of the book, and I was pleasantly surprised to find included one of my research concerns, namely Elizabeth Tripp and the Prahran schools she ran with her daughters. The cover, meanwhile, suggests that the text will romanticise female state school teachers of last century, transforming them into heroines of small, pioneering white settlements in rural Victoria or New South Wales. Although the book’s presentation might appeal to a wider audience, it misrepresents the content. ‘Knowing Women’ deserves far more than the treatment of mining it for footnotes that I was initially inclined to give it.

Theobald decided that, in writing an overview of women’s education in colonial Australia, she should focus on deepening her knowledge gained from many years of research in the area. Her adventorous engagement with contemporary feminist theoretical debates produces a multi-layered and
absorbing series of texts. Among her diverse chapters, there is something to interest most historians.

Chapter One explores the ideological background to the development of a feminine curriculum in Australia, exemplified by Henry Handel Richardson’s image of the woman at the piano in ‘The Getting of Wisdom’. Another literary allusion, this time to the Appleyard school in ‘Picnic at Hanging Rock’, opens up the largely unknown world of colonial ladies’ schools. Here Theobald shows how a series of fragmentary pieces can be connected and framed by an account of the dominant ideologies of a period to provide a provisional portrait of a lost past. The third and fourth chapters cover well-trodden ground in the stories of women’s admission to the Universities and the development of secondary schools for girls, and comprise a useful introduction to the debate. Overall one is left with an awareness of the networks of clergymen, liberal intellectuals, philanthropic women and professional men which appear repeatedly to oppose or urge the higher education of women.

It is in the remaining chapters that readers with only a passing interest in educational history may be stimulated in their own research projects. Chapter Five examines the contradictions raised for female schoolteachers by the introduction of compulsory primary education. Through the administration of gender women were kept at the bottom of the state education system hierarchy. Theobald indicates an area of significant research potential supported by an enormous body of bureaucratic documentation.

The sixth chapter attempts to complicate the already difficult question of how to write about the everyday, in this case contextualising the educational experience within women’s daily lives. It is here that Theobald’s theoretical questioning and empirical knowledge interact most convincingly. She speaks confidently from a wealth of detailed biographical data on female teachers, and, while debating how best to use this information to construct a bigger picture, she consistently points to her subjects’ humanity and agency.

In her final chapters, Theobald creates entirely new areas of interest. She brings a gendered analysis to the study of the first generation of students taught under compulsory education, arguing that despite the conservative nature of the gender differentiated curriculum, women were enabled to do more than simply marry. The unspoken exclusions of nineteenth century female education are well demonstrated in the last chapter, including criminal and destitute girls as well as a sensitive treatment of the isolationist policies practised upon Aboriginal girls.

‘Knowing Women’ demonstrates a variety of ways of doing history, always sensitive to personal narratives. Theobald exhibits both a profound interest in her subject and an exciting willingness to ask new questions, thereby extending the definition of women’s education so that it becomes a necessary part of any history of colonial Australian life. ‘Knowing Women’ proves the adage that ‘you can’t judge a book by its cover’.

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