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**AWAKENING WOMEN: WOMEN, HIGHER
EDUCATION AND FAMILY FORMATION IN SOUTH
AUSTRALIA c 1880-1920.**

by

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Awakening Women: Women, Higher Education and Family Formation in South Australia c 1880 - 1920

It is now over one hundred years since the first women gained admission to higher education in most countries of the industrialized west. Over that period many writers have both celebrated the achievement of a hard fought battle and deplored the slowness of universities to respond to women's needs. Recently feminist historians have begun to re-examine that experience and to place it in the context of broader social change, seeing within that debate an opportunity to contribute to wider historical questions.

This study seeks to reassess the meaning of higher education for women in the context of the demographic transition. Using a basic structuring framework of feminist history, it examines the outcome of the experience of higher education for a group of the earliest graduates of the University of Adelaide. Women's admission to the University of Adelaide is described and it is argued that the ready acceptance of women from the earliest days was due to the particular nature of South Australian society, one characterized by a vigorous middle class and a dissenting religious tradition.

The major focus of the study is the effect of that education on women's demographic behaviour and of their attachment to the workplace. Where possible, the women's life histories were reconstituted and the resultant data subjected to statistical analysis in order to illuminate patterns of marriage and childbearing in the group.

Much demographic work focuses on fertility decisions made by couples, giving little emphasis to the role of women in demographic change. This study challenges that emphasis and attempts to restore women's agency in fertility decision making. It is argued that women involved in the process of higher education were exposed to circumstances which potentially led to a change in consciousness, a change which is reflected in the decisions they made about marriage and childbirth.

The study also poses the question of consciousness as a factor in social change. It is argued that for women, access to the language and

argument of university curricula provided them with a means of attaining independence and of challenging women's traditional association with the realm of nature. Many graduates lived independently of men and found satisfying lives in women - centred communities. They were able to significantly affect their material circumstances, both within marriage and outside it. In the period studied university education provides an example of the significant liberatory potential of education for a specific group. The gender order was profoundly shaken, provoking a response which eventually subverted many of the earlier gains.