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WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA:
INSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENTS,
1875-1915

by

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Summary

This work is concerned with education in its broad sense, and it therefore includes both the formal education of women and their non-institutional education in the wider society. The period discussed is that between the two South Australian Education Acts of 1875 and 1915.

Considerable diversity existed in women's education during this period, although the desire to emulate British practice remained an important factor, as did the limitations imposed by South Australia's periodic economic depression and prosperity. Because official attitudes were influenced by contemporary British and European theories of national efficiency, the education authorities, accepting that girls should be prepared as future wives and mothers, imposed preliminary training for these roles in the state primary schools.

The state's attitude to women's education was ambivalent, in that South Australian legislators saw women in two roles. On the one hand they provided preparation for the domestic role, while on the other they encouraged women's higher education. They therefore opened University of Adelaide classes for women from their commencement and persuaded the British government to permit women to be admitted to degrees; they also established a successful state secondary school for girls, the only school of its kind for either sex for nearly thirty years.

Outside the state system, the provision of higher education for women, mainly through the private schools, was directly affected by the state secondary school which stimulated improved academic standards and also provided teaching staff for the independent schools which in turn developed some particular individual emphases. Both state and private girls' schools proved important in transmitting ideals and attitudes.

In the wider society, women's education was both deliberately organized and, sometimes, almost haphazard. Women themselves frequently initiated and organized education among other women. Their work and attitudes reflected facets of the women's movement in England and the United States, although it had particular South Australian characteristics related to the ideals of the free, mainly Protestant settlers. By no means confined to a single cause, many women educators on social questions worked in a number of areas.

Informal education was used to publicize and improve the poor conditions of many working women. Out of these campaigns arose the provision of legal mechanisms of control and regulation, and the emergence of self-education among women through their own trade unions and through co-operative efforts made by women from varied backgrounds.

The overlap of interests among female educators and the emergence of outstanding leaders was nowhere more pronounced than in the educational work for the female suffrage. Its relatively early success was due to a strong campaign in which women combined with men holding similar ideals to overcome both apathy and conservatism. On the basis of Parliamentary suffrage, certain women's associations sought further political reforms through educational means. In South Australia, where women's education was linked with the distinctive nature of the society, it had, in turn, deep influences on the society itself.