

## Making the world their own again in a new era?

**Meghan Healy-Clancy, *A World of their Own: A History of South African Women's Education***

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There must be a reason that there are so many powerful women in politics in South Africa, although recently with the notable exception of the Public Protector, Thuli Madonsela some of them have made a negative impression on the media and the public. Even then their prominence and a confidence that

sometimes seems out of proportion to their real achievements are in need of an explanation, especially in a country where women's rights have not advanced much beyond rhetoric.

Some of the explanation may be found in the kind of schooling they received, although, for the ones with poor reputations such as the late Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, we might not wish to hold their schools responsible for all their character traits. As it happens, Tshabalala-Msimang was one of the graduates of the Inanda Seminary that is the focus of Meghan Healy-Clancy's study. The former Minister of Health exhibited some of the typical characteristics of "old girls" from the school founded by the American Board for Foreign Missions long before Tshabalala-Msimang's time in 1869: she was resilient and sure of herself. Arguably, she was also responsible for large scale human devastation. But, perhaps our judgment should be mitigated by an understanding of the deep contradictions that characterised her formative experiences. Tshabalala-Msimang's abrasive approach and support of a particular kind of Africanist policy that many now agree was extremely damaging, should be seen in the context of a school that endowed girls with a real education and sense of worth that apartheid then did its best to dash. Some former pupils have reported that their initial reaction on encountering the world outside their school was anger that it had prepared them so little to feel that they were second or even third rate citizens.

Healy-Clancy's main theoretical objective is to reveal how the plan for "social reproduction" conceived of, first by the "benevolent empire" of the American missions and then more insidiously by the apartheid state, in which women would play the role of nurturers and reproducers of the labour force at a knockdown price, actually backfired. Ironically, she comments, by being cast as central to remoulding the family and peopling the teaching and caring professions, women became the recipients of skills that they could and did use to challenge apartheid. Healy-Clancy thinks perhaps this helps to explain what she calls the "new gendered contradictions" of post-apartheid society (p 2). It is a contention worth considering since the contradictions are so glaring.

As Healy-Clancy notes, very little attention has been paid to girls' schooling in the general literature on apartheid and education, beginning with the collection of essays edited by Peter Kallaway thirty years ago, which made forceful connections between the two, influenced by the so-called revisionist school's contemporary indictment of capitalism for its enabling role in the creation and sustainability of apartheid.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, Jonathan Hyslop tried to loosen the bonds somewhat, making the evolution of Bantu Education less directly indebted to the specific requirements of capitalism, without relinquishing the Kallaway et. al thesis that they enjoyed a generally beneficial mutual relationship.<sup>2</sup> Hyslop argued that an important ambition of Bantu Education had been to net the huge numbers of African children who were not in school in the 1940s and, in numerical terms, it had measurable success. He also pointed out, without discounting some of the very considerable and innovative alternative education movements of the 1950s

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1. P. Kallaway (ed.), *Apartheid and Education: The Education of Black South Africans* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1984).
  2. J. Hyslop, *The Classroom Struggle: Policy and Resistance in South Africa, 1940 1990* (University of KwaZulu Natal Press, Scottsville, 1999).

and later, that because Bantu Education was able to offer schooling (whatever its debased nature) to many who had been shut out of the mission schools because of limited resources, the extent of parental opposition was fairly limited. Building somewhat on Hyslop's observations about the contradictions embedded in Bantu Education, Healy-Clancy intends to highlight the feminisation of African schooling impelled by Verwoerd's declared intention to increase the proportion of women teachers and as a consequence of needing to staff racially segregated facilities. Inanda escaped the worst of Bantu Education, ironically being allowed to pursue an increasingly intellectual curriculum. After their initial shock at being treated as inferior once they had left the school, many of its alumni describe a stubborn determination to prove themselves and the record of their successes is impressive.

Healy-Clancy handles the social reproduction aspect of her thesis elegantly and persuasively. Her description of how the school navigated its potentially deeply problematic relationship with Buthelezi and Inkatha is excellent and sensitively done. Her study is also peopled with vivid characters, perhaps more so in the early chapters than in the latter ones. There is nobody that quite competes with the indomitable Mary Edwards, first principal of Inanda, who set out from her home in Troy, Ohio in one of the most turbulent eras of Natal's history at the end of the 1860s, prepared to set up an American household in a part of Africa, teaching Zulus with whom she was only acquainted through missionary periodicals. Back home, to which she kept on threatening to return, Edwards had been the secretary of the Ladies Missionary Society for the First Presbyterian Church. She was part of an extraordinary epoch in American missionary history when female missionaries substantially outnumbered men. When she arrived at Inanda she was supposed to get to work on preparing wives for African clergy. Evidence of her relationships with the girls and her impatient correspondence with the Board suggests that she sometimes entertained other kinds of ideas for their future. In the beginning, without any knowledge of the Zulu language and unsympathetic responses to her requests to the Board to allow her the opportunity to gain some, MaEdwards made some of the *kholwa* girls into teaching assistants. Her loving maternal relationship with one of these Talitha Hawes (not to be confused, as Norman Etherington evidently did, with Dalita Isaac, Pixley ka Seme's sister and not quite as "pure" as principal Fidelia Phelps fancied) is well drawn from the existing evidence. Sadly, MaEdwards' ambitions for Talitha to go to college in Ohio were defeated, but Talitha's subsequent success was a tribute to her schooling nonetheless.

There are also the fascinating accounts of the so-called "kraal girls" who came to Inanda as a refuge from forced marriages in contravention not only of the will of outraged parents but also the patriarchal legislative order maintained by the British colonial system with its particular Shepstonian version of indirect rule. MaEdwards has been remembered in a subsequent re-enactment, which probably took considerable dramatic licence, holding out against the magistrate's order that girls from the school be sent back to the husbands that had been chosen for them. Healy-Clancy's hypothesis about how girls strategised around temporary defections to Inanda in a period when homesteads had come under considerable pressure from the state and the depredations of the rinderpest epidemic is very suggestive. MaEdwards herself, after a single "self-declared furlough" (p 57) in the

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middle of the 1870s, stayed on at Inanda until she died in her bed in 1927 aged 98 years.

In the rest of the book we encounter the other principals, including MaKoza who was, by the sound of it, MaEdwards' equal in terms of indomitability and who produced graduates well-equipped to make their mark on post-apartheid South African society. But she is a less well-developed character than is MaEdwards. We learn of MaKoza only through the retrospective musings of her former charges and not through her own correspondence, as we have an opportunity to do with MaEdwards. There is nobody quite like Talitha or Dalita either. Healy-Clancy's strategy in the later chapters changes from fairly detailed biographical sketches, poignantly illustrated by black and white photographs of individuals with that peculiar aura that photographs of long ago possess, to borrow from Walter Benjamin's famous observation, to a more self-consciously pursued theoretical argument in which women's reminiscences are relayed to us at a rate which allows us to catch only fleeting glimpses of them. In her acknowledgements, Healy-Clancy admits to having been distracted sometimes by "narratives" (p xii) as if it were a fault that had to be checked by one of her mentors. Her argument is very lucid and evidentially strong. But I can't help wondering what the narratives were that she sacrificed to an idea of how one should write history.

Healy-Clancy leaves us with various challenges in relation to the values that we try to perpetuate through school curricula. In particular, she asks that we engage with the fact that while many women have been empowered in certain ways in South African society there are still intractable obstacles to their advancement in the workplace and the statistics of gender violence in this country are chilling, to say the least. It is to be hoped that Healy-Clancy's competent and well-written study will serve as an invitation to other scholars to conduct far more research into women's education and to ask more probing questions about the continued failure of school curricula and schools as institutions to provide women with the skills and self-esteem they need to avoid abusive relationships with men (and, on occasion other women) and to make their own way in the world.

*Cynthia Kros*  
*University of the Witwatersrand*