‘OURSELVES ALONE’?:

THE WORK OF SINGLE WOMEN IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA, 1911–1961: THE INSTITUTIONS WHICH THEY SHAPED AND WHICH SHAPED THEM

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the work of *life-long* single women in South Australia between 1911 and 1961. Its argument is that, to achieve their work objectives, these women had to both contest and collude with the dominant ideologies, and institutional controls which disadvantaged them. The thesis asserts that this examination of a group of life-long single women undermines the stereotype of lonely, useless spinsters.

Three themes were investigated in this study. The first was the challenge of accommodating the heterogeneity of single women's work, the number of institutions which shaped their occupational choices, and where and how they worked. The second was revealing the extent to which life-long single women both subverted and supported the ideologies of the period 1911 to 1961 to achieve their work objectives. The third theme was to show the power of institutions to incorporate within their structures, organisational cultures and work practices the dominant ideologies. Because the women were linked by their unmarried state, not their occupations, the study integrates the labour force statistics and institutional histories with the personal life and work histories of a group of life-long single women.

Apposite developments in Feminist History, Labour History and Organisational Theory, as well as the particular characteristics of South Australia have informed this analysis. Feminist History highlighted the importance of identifying the extent to which women both contested and colluded with the dominant ideologies. Labour History publications revealed the limited research on voluntary work and work done for religious reasons or to execute social responsibilities. Organisational Theory, in particular the field of Organisational Culture, fostered the investigation of single women's understanding of and negotiation with the dominant institutional cultures of the period.

This research demonstrates that the life-long single women studied here needed to and did test the boundaries of women's work in South Australia between 1911 and 1961. The small achievements of these single women provided for the next generation an example of the strengths and weaknesses of negotiation and conciliation to improve women's access to and success in the paid workforce.

DECLARATION

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

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INTRODUCTION: 'SPINSTERS INDISPENSABLE'[1] OR 'SURPLUS WOMEN'?[2]

On 23 June 1913, Miss Kate Cornell spoke to the Victorian Women's Political Association on the topic 'Spinsters Indispensable', 'a quaint presentation of the masculine idea of the unmarried woman.'[3] This provoked the editor of the *Argus* to assert that 'spinsters are, without doubt indispensable, but only to convert into wives.'[4] But it was a member of Kate Cornell's audience who stressed the State's need for and use of single women in the paid labour force:

> Miss Pinckney suggested that the Director of Education might be asked what he would do without the unmarried State school teachers. These spinsters were essential to the service of the State.[5]

Thesis Topic and Aims

In her statement Miss Pinckney named, in specific terms, the two topics which this thesis examines in a wider context: the work of South Australian single women in a time when long-term permanent employees were presumed to be men, and the complex relationships between women and the relevant institutions. After an analysis of the South Australian female labour statistics and identification of the number of institutions which have shaped women's work, three organisations are examined in detail. These are the South Australian Education Department, the Catholic religious order, the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, and the South Australian Industrial Court. The influence of these institutions on the single women is emphasised in the thesis title: '"Ourselves alone"?:[6] The work of single women in South Australia, 1911–1961: The institutions which shaped them and which

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[1] *The Woman Voter*, no. 55, 1913, p. 1.

[2] Quoted in Bacchi, C., 'The "woman question" in South Australia', in *The Flinders History of South Australia: Social History*, ed. E. Richards, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 1986, pp. 403–32, p. 406.

[3] *The Woman Voter*, no. 55, 1913, p. 1.

[4] Quoted in Holmes, K., '"Spinsters indispensable": Feminists, single women and the critique of marriage, 1890–1920', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 29, no. 110, 1998, pp. 68–90, p. 75.

[5] *The Woman Voter*, no. 55, 1913, p. 2.

[6] English translation of 'Sinn Fein', an Irish political party.

they shaped'. The thesis investigates whether or not, in their work, the single women studied ever were or could be alone, apart from institutions.

This research is a partial redress of the lack which Rosemary Auchmuty identified in 1975:

> But the makers of modern research, apparently unable to conceive of woman detached from the conventional family situation, have not seen fit to provide us with a book about working spinsters or single women in the workforce.[7]

It is notable that in 1998 Katie Holmes[8] still cited Beverley Kingston's 1975 book, *My Wife, My Daughter, and Poor Mary Ann,*[9] as the major study of the work of Australian single women. There Beverley Kingston had highlighted the invisibility of single women:

> Unmarried women have been excluded on two grounds from real participation in the workings of society: on the grounds that they are women, and on the grounds that they are unmarried.[10]

One of the aims of this thesis is to evaluate whether or not society knew about, let alone valued, the work of life-long single women in South Australia between 1911 and 1961.

Coincidentally in 1913, the American missionary Jessie Ackermann published her book *Australia From a Woman's Point of View.* This indefatigable organizer for the Women's Christian Temperance Union had visited Australia four times between 1889 and 1912. Her blunt assessment of Australian women in the workforce was that:

> Australia may be, and probably is, the working man's paradise, but it is far from a celestial condition for working and business girls.[11]

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[7] Auchmuty, R., 'Spinsters and trade unions in Victorian Britain', in *Women at Work*, eds A. Curthoys et al., Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Canberra, 1975, pp. 109–22, p. 110.

[8] Holmes, '"Spinsters indispensable": Feminists, single women and the critique of marriage, 1890–1920', p. 72.

[9] Kingston, B., *My Wife, My Daughter, and Poor Mary Ann: Women and Work in Australia*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1975.

[10] Ibid., p. 117.

[11] Ackermann, J., *Australia From a Woman's Point of View*, Cassell Australia, Sydney, 1981 (1913), p. 205.

The different standpoints revealed in the statements of Miss Kate Cornell, Miss Pinckney, the editor of the *Argus* and Jessie Ackermann highlight contradictory social attitudes to the work of life-long single women, the subject of this research. An 'humorist of no mean order,'[12] Miss Kate Cornell knew that the ironic title of her talk, 'Spinsters Indispensable', would probably inspire a choleric response, and the editor of the *Argus* obliged. Implicit in his assertion was the assumption that the single state is a stage in a woman's life-cycle. Judith Bennett and Amy Froide have highlighted the importance of identifying the implicit assumptions underlying the term 'single woman'. They distinguished between 'life-cycle singlewomen [sic]', who later married, and 'lifelong singlewomen [sic]' who never married.[13] It was the life-long single women whom the *Adelaide Observer* described as 'surplus women' in the 1880s and whose paid, unpaid and voluntary work is the subject of this thesis.[14]

The comments of Jessie Ackermann and Miss Pinckney relate directly to this research. Jessie Ackermann posited 'working and business girls' against 'working men', thereby emphasising the youth and single status of most women in the Australian labour force.[15] This was also the dominant situation in South Australia between 1911 and 1961.[16] While Miss Pinckney concentrated upon single women in the labour force, she used the negative term 'spinsters', which usually refers to women beyond marriageable age.[17] Despite the dominance of single women in the Australian female labour force between 1911 and 1961,[18] the research on their work is very limited. There are major studies on women in

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[12] *The Woman Voter*, no. 55, 1913, p. 2.

[13] Bennett, J. M. & Froide, A. M. (eds), *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250–1800*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1999, p. 2.

[14] Quoted in Bacchi, 'The "woman question" in South Australia', p. 406.

[15] Hunter, T., 'The employment of women in Australia', *Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1961, pp. 94–104.

[16] The female labour forces statistics are examined in Chapter 2.

[17] The research literature on spinsters is reviewed in Chapter 1.

[18] Australia. Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia*, 1911–1965.

the professions,[19] the institutional restrictions against women working in particular occupations,[20] the barriers to married women remaining in the labour market[21] and the unacknowledged work of women as wives and mothers in the home.[22] In this field, the South Australian single women in Alison Mackinnon's book, *Love and Freedom: Professional Women and the Reshaping of Personal Life,*[23] and Penelope Gregory's paper, 'Constructing the glass ceiling: Economics, gender and supply in the South Australian office, 1900–1935,'[24] are two of few South Australian studies.

The emphasis of the above studies is on a particular occupation or profession, and, therefore, references to the youth and unmarried state of the majority of women employees are few and far between. Furthermore, these references are usually in the context of refuting the Marxist theory of the reserve army of labour – thus, for example, Melanie Nolan's analysis:

> While the Victorian Clerk's Union agitated to exclude married women, it sought to protect single business girls who would leave employment to marry. The majority of clerks in the depression, then, were single women, under 25 and there were few calls for them to give up their jobs to men. Above all, employers were keen to keep female labour in the depression because it was, as it had been for some time, cheap.[25]

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[19] e.g. Thornton, M., *Dissonance and Distrust: Women in the Legal Profession*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996; Theobald, M. & Dwyer, D., 'An episode in feminist politics: The *Married Women (Lecturers and Teachers) Act, 1932–47*', *Labour History*, no. 76, May 1999, pp. 59–77; Theobald, M., 'Women teachers' quest for salary justice in Victoria's registered schools, 1915–1946', *Melbourne Studies in Education*, 1983, pp. 1–43.

[20] e.g. Deacon, D., 'The employment of women in the Commonwealth public service: The creation and reproduction of a dual labour market', *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, vol. 41, no. 3, 1982, pp. 232–50; Deacon, D., 'Equal opportunity and Australian bureaucracy 1880–1930', *Australian Quarterly*, vol. 57, no. 1/2, 1985, pp. 32–46; Mumford, K., *Women Working: Economics and Reality*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989.

[21] e.g. Ryan, E. & Conlon, A., *Gentle Invaders: Australian Women at Work 1788–1974*, Thomas Nelson (Aust.), Melbourne, 1975.

[22] e.g. Matthews, J. J., 'Deconstructing the masculine universe: The case of women's work', in *All Her Labours*, vol. 1, ed. Publications Collective of the *Third Women and Labour Conference*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1984, pp. 11–23.

[23] Mackinnon, A., *Love and Freedom: Professional Women and the Reshaping of Personal Life*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997.

[24] Gregory, P., 'Constructing the glass ceiling: Economics, gender and supply in the South Australian office, 1900–1935', *The Flinders Journal of History and Politics*, vol. 18, 1996, pp. 103–15.

[25] Nolan, M., 'Making clerks and re-shaping the white-collar workforce in the twentieth century', *Labour History*, no. 63, Nov. 1992, pp. 65–82, p. 80.

This gap is all the more significant when it is linked with the literature on the gendered division of the Australian labour market whereby the majority of women were concentrated in a limited number of occupations. This literature suggests that except for the years of World War II, there were few significant changes in the gendered division of paid labour between 1911 and 1961.[26]

Judith Bennett and Amy Froide have described research into single women before 1800 as *nascent*,[27] an adjective equally applicable to research into Australian single women of all periods. Authoritative biographies of the most notable single women have been written, for example, on Catherine Helen Spence;[28] Rose Scott;[29] Mother Mary MacKillop;[30] and Vida Goldstein.[31] This 'great woman' historical approach provides a limited understanding of the work of the majority of single women. A few South Australian single women, such as Mary P. Harris[32] and May Douglas,[33] have written and self-published slender autobiographies. But most life-long single women warrant only passing references in family and institutional histories. Thus Kath Marner and Heather McIntyre reminisced about an older boarder at Adelaide's St Mary's Hostel in the 1940s and early 1950s:

> Miss Pilkington, originally from Georgetown, was an older woman who did not go out to work. Miss Pilkington spent most of the day and evening crocheting in the lounge … she could look out the front and see whoever came. She would know all your boyfriends and

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[26] Hunter, 'The employment of women in Australia'; Hunter, T., 'Some factors which determine the distribution of the female work force', *Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1962, pp. 108–19; Richmond, K., 'The workforce participation of married women in Australia', in *Social Change in Australia: Readings in Sociology*, ed. D. E. Edgar, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1974, pp. 267–309.

[27] Bennett & Froide (eds), *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250–1800*, p. 4.

[28] Magarey, S., *Unbridling the Tongues of Women: A Biography of Catherine Helen Spence*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1985.

[29] Allen, J., *Rose Scott: Vision and Revision in Feminism*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994.

[30] Gardiner, P., *An Extraordinary Australian: Mary MacKillop: The Authorised Biography*, E.J. Dwyer, Alexandria, NSW, 1994.

[31] Bomford, J., *That Dangerous and Persuasive Woman: Vida Goldstein*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1993.

[32] Harris, M. P., *In One Splendour Spun: Autobiography of a Quaker Artist*, Mary Packer Harris, Adelaide, 1971.

[33] Douglas, M. S., *A Happy Life 1904–*, M. Douglas, Adelaide, 1988.

> when they came and what they looked like. That was her interest … she was really interested in us as people.[34]

On the canvas of Australian women's history which has been filled in apace since the late 1960s,[35] adult single women are still shadowy figures barely discernible behind their married sisters. In the patchwork quilt which is the history of women's work in Australia, this research provides another piece for inclusion. Whilst the relationship between this study and the literature is spelt out in Chapter 1, a brief statement of the three propositions for undertaking this study is appropriate here. Firstly, life-long Australian single women and their work are relatively unexamined, providing a 'field for many tillings'.[36] Secondly, there is an eastern seaboard dominance of Australian feminist history writing[37] which needs to be balanced with research done in other States. Thirdly, the period 1911 to 1961 is, as Joy Damousi has noted, an era 'largely unexamined and unexplained.'[38] In this period, the Australian Censuses were the only official sources of information on women in the paid workforce.[39] Therefore, the Australian Censuses of 1911, 1921, 1933, 1947, 1954 and 1961 provide the institutional bookends and intervening snapshot pictures of the work of single women over fifty years. In her pioneering study of the period and the work of feminists, Marilyn Lake thus explained the few references to single women:

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[34] O'Neil, B., *Learning For Life: St Mary's Hostel (1916–1972) and the Catholic Women's League Child Care Centre (1975–1999)*, Catholic Women's League of S.A. Inc., Adelaide, 1999, pp. 17, 25.

[35] For an overview, see the bibliographies in Magarey, S. & Ryan, L., *A Bibliography of Australian Women's History*, A.H.A. Bibliographies in Women's History, no. 6, ed. P. Grimshaw, Australian Historical Association, Melbourne, 1990; Matthews, J. J., 'Doing theory or using theory: Australian feminist/women's history in the 1990s', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 27, no. 106, 1996, pp. 49–58; Caine, B. et al. (eds), *Australian Feminism: A Companion*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998.

[36] Radford, W. C., *A Field For Many Tillings: Research in Education in Australia Today*, Australian Council for Educational Research, Hawthorn, Vic., 1964.

[37] Davidson, D., 'A citizen of Australia and of the world: A reappraisal of Bessie Mabel Rischbieth', in *Women and Citizenship: Suffrage Centenary*, eds P. Crawford & J. Skene, Studies in Western Australian History 19, Centre for Western Australian History, University of Western Australia, Perth, 1999, pp. 99–113.

[38] Damousi, J., 'Marching to different drums: Women's mobilisations, 1914–1939', in *Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation*, eds K. Saunders & R. Evans, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Sydney, 1992, pp. 350–97, p. 363.

[39] The 1911 Census was the first which the Commonwealth Department of the Bureau of Census and Statistics conducted after its establishment in 1905. *Year Book, Australia*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, 1988, p. 46.

> In their critique of sexual relations between men and women, Australian feminists focussed, in particular, on the vulnerable condition of the wife. Their political agenda was less concerned than that of English feminists with the plight of the single woman; the different demographic situation in Australia, with men outnumbering women, meant that that the vast majority of Australian women – including feminists – married at some point in their lives.[40]

Themes

As befits a study which emphasises the negotiations of single women with institutions, the thesis examines their work within institutional frameworks. But interwoven throughout the organisational analyses and personal stories are three major themes described briefly below and drawn out in the Conclusion. The first is the challenges of accommodating within a research study both the heterogeneity of single women's work and the institutions which shaped their occupational choices, and where and how they worked. The second is the extent to which life-long single women both contested and colluded with the ideologies of the period 1911 to 1961 to achieve their work objectives. The third theme investigates the power of institutions to incorporate within their structures, organisational cultures and work practices the dominant ideologies.

The single women studied for this thesis are a group linked by only one criterion, their unmarried status. There were artists and accountants, doctors and dentists, nurses and social workers, educators and musicians, factory workers and dressmakers. Individually, they were employers, employees, self-employed or of independent means, and among them there were significant differences of class, income and religion. The heterogeneous work of this small group offers the space to examine both the nature and purpose of work, both for the women themselves and the South Australian society of their time. The thesis investigates further Drusilla Modjeska's asides:

> If this was a generation to benefit from a breach in the masculine order, it was not a generation of women in opposition to men … [But] the culture was not kind to the spinster.[41]

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[40] Lake, M., *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism,* Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1999, p. 35.

[41] Modjeska, D., *Stravinsky's Lunch*, Picador, Sydney, 1999, pp. 190, 186.

The thesis asserts that the work of life-long single women in the period under study demonstrates the falseness of the stereotype of lonely, useless spinsters, 'surplus women'.

Between 1911 and 1961 the domestic ideology, which prescribed for adult women the role of wives and mothers, was one which life-long single women had to contest since they were not fulfilling these roles. However, this thesis also seeks to identify the other ideologies which both freed and constrained single women in the achievement of their work objectives. 'The good of the community',[42] which President Jethro Brown invoked as his guiding principle in the first Equal Pay case in the South Australian Industrial Court in 1918, points to 'the complex intermingling of ideologies'[43] with which working single women had to contend. The discussion on 'women's work' examines the erroneous psychological beliefs about the work which women could and should do, and the legislation which constrained women but not men in certain occupations.[44] This study also explores the extent to which world events and changing social attitudes affected single women in the labour force. For example, the study examines whether or not Australia's need for female labour during World War II broadened the ambitions and opportunities for single women in the paid labour force.

The investigation into the power and role of institutions on the work of single women in South Australia between 1911 and 1961 emphasises in particular the number of organisational theories which affected their work. For example, research in organisational structure and culture[45] and industrial relations[46] have highlighted their interrelationships with the domestic ideology on the role of adult women as wives and mothers. The detailed examination of these ideologies is done in Chapter 1. This is a further extension of that which Jill Matthews studied in *Good and Mad Women.*[47] She examined the Education

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[42] *South Australian Industrial Reports*, vol. 2, p. 40.

[43] Bennett, L., 'The construction of skill: Craft unions, women workers and the Conciliation and Arbitration Court', *Law in Context*, vol. 2, 1984, pp. 118–32, p. 125.

[44] Hunter, 'Some factors which determine the distribution of the female work force', p. 108.

[45] e.g. Mills, A. J., 'Studying the gendering of organizational culture over time: Concerns, issues and strategies', *Gender, Work and Organization*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2002, pp. 286–307.

[46] e.g. Pocock, B. (ed.), *Strife: Sex and Politics in Labour Unions*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1997.

[47] Matthews, J. J., *Good and Mad Women: The Historical Construction of Femininity in Twentieth-century Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1984.

Department, the Arbitration System and the Immigration Department to demonstrate the 'ways in which three institutions shaped the gender-order and enforced it.'[48]

Thesis Organisation

The above Introduction offers the reader an outline of the thesis topic, its aims and objectives. The detailed examination of the relevant issues and their relationship with the research literature is done in Chapter 1. The number of possible interpretations of critical terms, for example, 'single women' and 'work', has meant that the definitions adopted by significant institutions have influenced the structure of this thesis. In this regard, the use of language has been as important as the primary sources, the research literature and the methodology. Therefore, the relevant literature review has been incorporated within the discussion of critical terms and methodology.

Chapter 2 investigates the South Australian female labour statistics from the Australian Censuses held in 1911, 1921, 1933, 1947, 1954 and 1961. The detailed examination has three aims. The first is to consider whether single women were as disadvantaged as married women by the institutional control of labour force statistics. The second is disaggregation of the statistics by the occupational status categories of employee, employer, self-employed and unemployed, to test Thelma Hunter's 1961 judgement that the significant changes post-World War II were in 'the age composition of the [female] workforce and its marital status.'[49] This also enables a comparison of the trends in male and female employee numbers and ratios in the total labour force statistics. The personal stories of some single women who were in the paid labour force illustrate the differences between single women, especially in their responses to the dominant ideologies. The third aim is a short analysis of single women in the industry statistics to highlight the gendered division of labour in South Australia between 1911 and 1961.

Chapter 3 examines the working lives of some single women for their correspondence with the research literature. For these women, the identified factors affecting occupational

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[48] Matthews, J. M., 'Good and mad women: A study of the gender order in South Australia 1920–1970', PhD thesis, University of Adelaide, 1978.

[49] Hunter, 'The employment of women in Australia', p. 96.

choice were all present and the women recognised the extent to which personal qualities, family, education and work institutions had structured their individual choices. Highlighted is the fact that the determination of single women to achieve their work objectives crossed class, religious and economic boundaries. The examination of the working lives of nurses and teachers reveals the similarities and differences in the institutional controls and opportunities for women in these two feminine occupations.

Chapter 4 studies the work of single women who were influential in the South Australian Education Department between 1911 and 1961. This is done according to Vivien Hart's research agenda of 'management style, role of policy networks outside the bureaucracy and the advantages and disadvantages of new and gendered policies and institutions and the relationship between innovation, separatism and marginalization.'[50] With due acknowledgment that these women stretched rather than broke through the institutional boundaries limiting women in the paid labour force, the investigation argues that they were 'active crusaders, not passive servants of the state.'[51]

Chapter 5 is an investigation of the Institute of the Sisters of St Joseph; an organisation established and run by single women for the elementary education of poor Catholic children. The examination highlights the strength of the organisational structure and culture of the Sisters of St Joseph which enabled the nuns to achieve their mission under difficult conditions. This chapter also considers the purpose of work since the Sisters of St Joseph worked for religious reasons, not for an income or to further their careers.

Chapter 6 examines the most significant equal pay cases in the South Australian Industrial Court between 1911 and 1961. It has sought to show where, in its judgements, the South Australian Industrial Court 'unprivileged'[52] and then denied the value of women's work. The analysis focuses on the dominant role of the Court in the achievement of, or failure to achieve, single women's paid work objectives and the willingness of unionised women employees to go to the Court and use a range of strategies to achieve their objectives.

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[50] Hart, V., 'Feminism and bureaucracy: The minimum wage experiment in the District of Columbia', *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1992, pp. 1–22, p. 18.

[51] Ibid., p. 7.

[52] Heagney, M., *Arbitration at the Cross Roads*, National Press Pty Ltd, Melbourne, 1954, p. 103.

The Conclusion relates the evidence from Chapters 2 to 6 to the themes underlying this research. First, the investigation will show the value of studying the work of single women. Life-long single women are a little-studied minority group whose work is marked by its heterogeneity. But these characteristics have offered the opportunity to investigate the relationship between paid and unpaid work and the links between the specific employment related and the general definition of 'work'. By concentrating upon the influences of organisations upon the work of single women, I will be able to point to the relationship between organisational culture and the dominant ideologies of the period. I will argue in this thesis that single women tested the institutional controls over the gendered division of labour in South Australia between 1911 and 1961. As individuals, they took advantage of the wider work opportunities available to women but their achievements brought few gains for the majority of women. The power of institutions, the third theme in this research, remained an effective Maginot Line to control women's work in South Australia during this period. However, the life-long single women studied did not conform to the spinster stereotype alluded to in 'surplus women'.