

OPEN FOUNDATION HISTORY PROJECT

Profile on a successful, independent woman.

Miss Phyllis Bennett, M.B.E., B.A.,
N.S.W. Teacher's Certificate
Art Teacher's Diploma.

AN EDUCATOR AND DEVOTEE TO THE ARTS

N.S.W. CENTRAL COAST

Mavis Pattinson

Tuesday Night Class

Phyllis Bennett grew up in the country. Reading was her favourite past time as she progressed through school. University in Sydney opened up a whole new world. It introduced her to not only her teaching career but also to the art and theatre which has played an important role in her life and led to her award of an "M.B.E."¹

Miss Bennett was born in Mullimbimby in 1906, the only child of her father's second marriage. The family moved to a farm on the North Coast and her sixth birthday was celebrated at Kyogle among her father's five other children. It was a household of domestic order, high literacy and much letter writing.

School began in a scant population at a one teacher school, which was presided over by teachers who one by one volunteered for war service. Miss Bennett quickly began to read everything she could lay her hands on; Dickens and Scott, the annual chatterbox, and she developed a secret passion for the weekly Bulletin which was considered too rough for young ladies. The high school qualifying certificate was gained in a class of fifty girls at ~~Grantfon~~^{GRAFTON}, where she had been sent for the last year.

First year at high school (1919) was interrupted by two months closure of the school because of Spanish Influenza. Two courses were available and Miss Bennett chose the subjects necessary to take her to university; English, French, Geography, History, Science and compulsory Latin. A teacher, J. B. Ireland influenced her great love of literature.

Sydney University was financially possible because of a scholarship, which most students had those days. Payment was £80:00 a month and demanded a five year teaching bond. Studying English

1. Member of the Order of the British Empire (M.B.E.)

and History honours allowed Miss Bennett a free rein in the library book stacks and she read well outside her course. A long serious illness caused a failure in Latin in the second year, which resulted in Miss Bennett doing her last year at the Teacher's College but she managed to attend her honour's classes at the university and so graduated with a Bachelor of Arts.

Although qualified to teach high school, Miss Bennett was advised to teach primary for a year. She began at Darlinghurst and stayed two years. This allowed her to continue her interest in architecture, art galleries and theatre which she had grown to love.

Now confident to teach, Miss Bennett, with a first class train ticket from the department, arrived at Grenfell in 1929 in the midst of a severe drought. Classes of about ten were often taught on the open verandah of the old building. Apart from the Headmaster, Miss Bennett was the most experienced teacher there. She was given a free hand with teaching, sports, library and social activities and produced a full Shakespearian play with the bitterness of the depression around her.

After five years, an appointment to Randwick Boys, pleased Miss Bennett. It allowed her to pursue her Little Theatre interest at a time when the Independent Theatre was establishing.² A quick move to Fort Street, where she completed the year, brought objections from a teacher with more country service - hence Gosford, which was to become her home.

Another change at this time was her broken engagement. Miss Bennett's fiancée was called to family business in Western Australia and the Married Women Lecturer's and Teacher's Act of 1932 ensured the dismissal of any woman teacher ^{who} was to marry.³

2. Doris Fitton, Not without Dust and Heat, Independent Theatre established August 1930 (Sydney 1981)

3. The Statutes of N.S.W. 1932, Act No. 28.

Considering the time and her independence, she chose a career and Gosford was a new start.

In 1933, Gosford had become a high school⁴ covering a wide area from Brooklyn to Awaba. It was incredibly crowded, with fourteen woman teachers sharing a hat room for staff in 1935 when Miss Bennett arrived. She was pleased it was a co-educational school and close enough to Sydney to persue her theatre interest for a five shilling and threepence train journey.

Almost from the first day, Miss Bennett began to organise a proper library. She attended a teacher's Library Training School in the Christmas vacation and was among the twenty chosen for the first group to be taught library practice. A personal interview with the Director of Education led to the inclusion of a well appointed library being included in the school's proposed extensions. Seeing libraries as an essential part of education, Miss Bennett also battled for the establishment of a town library. At its opening in 1947, she was honoured with the number one card.

Teaching of English and History continued for Miss Bennett, often staying late with her honour students. When the opportunity to teach art came, she found a new love and travelled three evenings a week to gain an Art Teacher's Diploma after thirty three hours examination.

Many other activities such as training children for public speaking, hockey coaching,⁵ producing school plays, taking beginner's swimming and diving classes, attending first aid and organising social events all made Miss Bennett part of the school. In 1945, she was appointed as Girls' Supervisor, a position she held till leaving Gosford High in 1959.

4. Gosford began as a Rural School 1929 and converted to a High School 1933 (I confirmed this by phone call)

5. Miss Bennett was a member of the Sydney University Hockey team until about 1940.

Three years teaching at Sydney Teacher's College followed before her retirement. Miss Bennett particularly enjoyed teaching English Method to the special groups from the Art School and the Conservatorium. Generally she found it very little different to teaching senior high school students.

Along with a companion, Miss Bennett toured England and the continent when she retired. They wanted to experience all *the* seasons in England. A Drama School near Stratford received them as residents and they secured tickets to see a whole range of Shakespearian plays. Art galleries and cathedrals enthralled them but the Shakespeare was an English teacher's dream.

Miss Bennett carried her love of art and literature to the adult world when she founded the Gosford Players about 1970.⁶ She had been involved in producing, with several groups since the late fifties, and her production of The Shifting Heart won her the James Corneson Prize for production.⁷ As President of the Central Coast Branch of the Art's Council until recently, through them, Miss Bennett has helped to stage eleven Art Shows; one sponsored by Sir Russell Drysdale.⁸ She has been called on to judge several Art Shows and also judge short stories for the Fellowship of Australian Writers. Since 1977, she has been conducting a Beginner's Art Class for senior citizens, a Creative Literature Class at the Gosford Community School, and has held Drama Workshops. In 1983, Miss Bennett toured with the Minister for Home Affairs Barry Cohen, to several regional Art Centres in Victoria, to advise on design proposals for a Gosford Art Centre, which she still hopes to see accomplished.

In 1977, the honour of the M.B.E. was awarded to Miss Bennett for services to the arts and Gosford citizens thought it a fitting reward.⁹

6. Gosford Star, July 9, 1975

7. I bid

8. I bid

9. Central Coast Express, June 18, 1977

As an independent woman, she has led a most successful and worthwhile life. Her teaching has carried into ^{many} fields and her devotion to the Arts has accomplished much for Gosford and the Central Coast. As an ex-pupil it has been a pleasure to renew her acquaintance.

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

Fitton Doris, Not Without Dust and Heat

Sydney, 1981

The Statutes of N.S.W. 1932, Act No 28

Local Papers. Central Coast Express, 18-6-1977

Gosford Star, 9-7-1975