

# A whole new world for a country girl

Helen Elliott

## School Days of a Methodist Lady: A Journey Through Girlhood

By Jill Sanguinetti  
Wild Dingo Press, 239pp, \$29.95

IN small rural towns in the 1950s, a girl might have led a life closer to the late Victorian existence Miles Franklin described than that of any contemporary country child. Parents were casual. Children rode their bikes, or horses, played in creeks and swamps, killed tiger snakes, spoke to strangers, spent entire days at the local pool without sunblock and returned home at dusk in time for tea. Boredom came with the territory but so did the complex beauty of boredom, that capacity to slow time.

Jill Sanguinetti's parents ran the newsagency in one of the interchangeable but prosperous

towns across country Victoria, and in 1958, when Jill was 13, she went to boarding school in Melbourne. Not just any boarding school but the very particular MLC, Methodist Ladies College. Note the two words: Methodist and Ladies. Do either have anything to do with the world circa 2015? Doubtful.

The reading diet of a girl born in 1944 included the famous children's writers of the period, LM Montgomery, Susan Coolidge, Angela Brazil and Enid Blyton. Brazil and Blyton in particular wrote imaginative moral tales about English children in the boarding schools that England made its own and Australia lovingly emulated.

Gulping down these tales, filled with midnight feasts and safe adventures, Jill knew she was destined for boarding school and cast herself as lively schoolgirl heroine. She couldn't wait to become a boarder, to farewell dull country life and her sometimes difficult family.

"MLC was now to be my centre, the place to where I would be shaped towards an unimaginable future." The unimaginable future swiftly revealed a duality. The country girl missed her family, her dog and her home town, but that life went into storage, sauntering out only in "holidays". Daily reality was a physical place shared with strange girls and even stranger teachers. The food was unspeakable and the girls learned to be both hungry and greedy. Some thrived, others, often the more tender-hearted and individual, did not.

Ticking along under the fabled leadership of the brilliant but temperamentally puritan Alfred Harold Wood, MLC the institution was matchless in producing sterling young women who had been instilled with the honourable Christian notions of service and awareness of privilege. But it had a capricious grasp on anything other than mainstream.

In Wood's constant presence about the

school and in daily scripture the girls would be reminded of his motto and work ethic based on Luke 12:48: "Everyone to whom much is given, of him will much be required."

The long view is invaluable and one of the subtle pleasures of *School Days of a Methodist Lady* is Sanguinetti's capacity to reflect on entangled aspects of this critical four years of her life. You can love and hate equally, and with complete justification. You can also change your mind daily with perfect intelligence.

Sanguinetti went on to Melbourne University to become a teacher and her profound interest in and knowledge of education anchors this book. That she went to university is in itself an achievement of both the individual and the school in a period when educating girls was casual. The singularity of MLC was that when similar schools were educating their female pupils to progress to a year at a superior domestic arts college, MLC took education with the utmost

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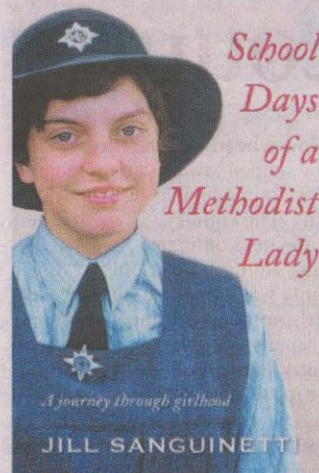
seriousness. For parents who wanted their daughters to be something other than wife, mother, ornament and unpaid domestic, MLC was the light on the hill. Or halfway up.

Still, it was 1958 and Sanguinetti's education involved girls becoming Ladies. Elocution, scripture, manners, tennis, debating, chapel and swimming all figured but music, on any instrument, and a language beyond the usual French was encouraged. Literature was inspired and mathematics explained. Wood searched the world for teachers he thought appropriate for his charges and sometimes turned up women with a vocation.

Boarding school and the emotional distress it wrought aside, what Sanguinetti had was a proper education, provided, on the whole, by people who believed in the possibilities of education. It was an extraordinary privilege.

Jill and her sister would have been two of a handful of girls (and boys) in their town whose parents could afford the luxury of educating their children.

She does not pretend anything otherwise and those who made do with less in those years will note with gratitude the absence in this



memoir of that smug "my parents scrimped and saved and did without for my education". In the Menzies years lines of education were unmistakable: the haves and the have-nots. The lines rarely crossed.

*School Days of a Methodist Lady* is based on a cache of letters between Jill and her parents during the years she boarded. The ones to and from her warm-hearted father are especially touching. The startling innocence of these old letters will return many readers to the language and sensibility of a world long gone.

Australia is not short on excellent school days narratives but Sanguinetti brings a thoughtfulness and detail — excessive at times — to bear on aspects of how young lives are shaped. One of the tender-hearted, more individual than rebel, she survived her "shaping" rather than flourished because of it. The nuances involved make her memoir stand out. This tale of one girl's growing-up will resonate with baby boomers and could prove an absorbing historical document for any reader interested in the consequences of An Education.

Helen Elliott is a writer and critic.