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## Safety in an English setting

**K**EREVER PARK has its origins during the Second World War, when children were evacuated from Sydney to rural safety. The Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus had two schools in Sydney: Rose Bay Convent and Kincoppal Convent, both located on the foreshore of Sydney Harbour. When in 1944 the harbour became a target for Japanese attack, the religious decided to move the students out of the city. Initially they considered the Blue Mountains area, but finally they chose the towns of Bowral and Bundanoon in the Southern Highlands. The choice was partly expedient, as the guesthouses of these popular holiday destinations could easily house large numbers of children. At the same time, the Southern Highlands also had a history that made it a suitable environment for girls from middle-class families.

Many European Australians, including me, have either carried with us or inherited a melancholy for another country—for ‘symbols of the gold, green, pleasant land’ of England.<sup>1</sup> I was particularly struck by how much at home I felt the first time I visited the Lakes District in England. Those who established the long-standing private schools that have educated the children of Australia’s middle classes certainly looked back in their imaginations to England.<sup>2</sup> These schools, initially established to produce leaders for a society which was part of the British Empire, clung to their origins.<sup>3</sup> This affinity with England may account for the location of a number of such schools in the Southern Highlands, with its tracts of open grasslands and its relatively cool, wet climate. Most of the schools in the area (unlike the state-run schools and parochial Catholic schools) were boarding schools for middle-class students. These included two ‘preparatory’ schools for senior schools in Sydney: Tudor House for boys (associated with The Kings School Parramatta and still in operation) and Kerever Park for girls (closed

in 1965 and now a retreat and a retirement home for members of the Society).

The Southern Highlands caught the eye of the early British colonists. Governor Lachlan Macquarie, on visiting the area for the first time in 1820, remarked that it was ‘particularly beautiful and rich, resembling a fine extensive pleasure ground in England’,<sup>4</sup> a comparison which illustrates the theory that what we notice in the landscape has a history and is as much a product of the memory as a physical manifestation of rock and vegetation.<sup>5</sup> As Peter Beilharz has commented, imagination also has material effects.<sup>6</sup> Europeans have steadily anglicised the Australian environment, bringing it into line with our visions of it, and the Southern Highlands illustrates that process. The indigenous population was removed by the late 1800s, and the area became a summer retreat for wealthy Sydney families who aspired to the trappings of the English upper classes. They commissioned large homes based on English country-house designs, in keeping with those outlined in Robert Kerr’s 1865 treatise on the essential characteristics of ‘the gentleman’s house’: privacy, comfort, convenience, spaciousness, compactness, light and air, salubrity, aspect and prospect, cheerfulness, elegance, importance and ornament.<sup>7</sup> Other fundamental features included separate quarters for servants, stables, formal and informal gardens (the gardens of the Southern Highlands consisted largely of European trees, shrubs and flowers), a kitchen garden and perhaps an orchard.

The primary purpose of the country homes of the Southern Highlands, then, was ‘to relax, to entertain and, not least, to offer tangible evidence of worldly success’.<sup>8</sup> A less conscious reason for the creation of Arcadian landscapes may be our ambivalence about modern civilisation and city life. Turning to country life to escape the madness of the city has its origins in eighteenth-century England and the rise of the middle classes. The Industrial Revolution ended the dominance of rural life and an agrarian, hand-craft economy, as industry and machine manufacturing became the major source of work. Initially the owners of such businesses lived either on their work premises or close by. As they became more successful, many preferred to separate work and family life, choosing rural settings for their homes. The city came to be perceived as corrupt and the country as innocent: poet William Cowper’s statement ‘God made the country, man the town’ became a popular maxim of the period.<sup>9</sup> The separation of work and family life also became associated with the overarching categories of masculine (world) and feminine (home).<sup>10</sup> The Southern Highlands served a similar purpose for wealthy Sydney families from the nineteenth century onwards. And many of us still aspire to a country retreat where we can sit on the verandah and reflect on the beauty of our surroundings.

## The establishment of Kerever Park

When the Second World War ended and the Society’s rusticated students were able to return to Sydney, a decision was made by the Superior General of the Society in Australia and New Zealand, Mother Dorothy McGuinness, to make a permanent foundation in Bowral for the junior children. She wrote that ‘so happy had they been in their peaceful country setting, with rosy cheeks and shining eyes telling of the benefits of fresh air and country food’ that ‘they should not be taken from their great out-of-doors’.<sup>11</sup>

Mother McGuinness’s motivation for establishing a permanent school in the area may have been not only safety and class appropriateness but also a belief associated with the English preparatory-school tradition—in a healthy country life whereby young children could grow up away from the corrupting influences of a large city. The Society had a number of schools in England and indeed three of the five women who came to Australia with the congregation’s first wave in 1882 were English.<sup>12</sup> Mother McGuinness’s desire for the younger children not to be taken away from their country homes may also have stemmed from her own early life, which was marked by the death of both her parents.<sup>13</sup> This perhaps enabled her to empathise with the children: the homely setting of a boarding school in the country may, in her mind, have reduced their sense of dislocation.

The Society established its permanent school in a large country home known as Noyle. Built in the 1890s for Charles Fairfax, son of the founder of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the house had been named after an old estate in England and designed by an English architect, Maurice Evans. Its architectural style is often called Queen Anne, although the building has many characteristics of the Cottage Style of small country houses built throughout England in the eighteenth century.<sup>14</sup> The property, which was renamed Kerever Park (after a Sacred Heart superior in France) when acquired by the Society, was positioned down a quiet country lane. Its long gravel drive led past extensive formal gardens and sweeping lawns to the front entrance where a curving garden, complete with sundial, created a circular return. The two-storey white stucco building had a series of high-pitched, gabled, slate roofs and a wide verandah that swept around two sides of the building. The mullioned bay windows of the upper floor also featured slate-covered overhangs, and at one corner of the first floor a door led to a tiny decorative verandah. Three large chimneys signalled the fireplaces, with their carved surrounds, contained within. A coach house, stable and hayloft at the back of the building were also part of the original estate.

After the school was purchased by the Society, one side of the house was extended to include a chapel, a larger dining-room and a classroom.



Front view of Kerever Park

These additions, seen from the front, were sympathetic to the original design, although not so a fibro study room attached to the back. This room, a second-hand structure bought during the war when there was a shortage of building materials, was intended to be temporary. However, it was still there when I left the school at the end of 1960. A large, rectangular two-storey building—a later, separate addition at the back of the original house—was more in keeping with institutional architecture than with a country home.<sup>15</sup> Further formal gardens, including a sunken area with a grotto, were laid out around the front of the house, hiding an orchard, gardener's cottage and vegetable garden at the side. Beyond, meadows flowed down to the Wingecarribee River. A small working farm of dairy cows, pigs and poultry was developed after the property was purchased by the Society.

Not all children who went to Kerever Park came from wealthy families. In the twenty-two years of the school's operation, eighteen children, according to the school register, were on reduced fees.<sup>16</sup> Madeleine Sophie Barat had been committed to educating the poor as well as the daughters of the wealthy, and only reluctantly agreed to grand premises for the upper-class boarding schools.<sup>17</sup> It might be expected that most of the children at Kerever Park were from the country, but this was not the case. While the majority did come from rural areas (40 per cent from rural properties and 12.6 per cent from rural towns), a significant number (34.7 per cent) came from Sydney.<sup>18</sup> The decision to place country children in a boarding school

may be explained by factors such as isolation and a dearth of educational choices in remote areas, but this was not the case for Sydney families. Parental motivations for school choice are usually mixed. It seems likely that the high social status of a country boarding school conducted by the Society may have attracted some middle-class families. Certainly my mother had been influenced in her decision to send me to Kerever Park by her sister, who sent her daughter to Rose Bay Convent in Sydney for such reasons. The low student numbers at Kerever Park, compared with the swelling student numbers in local Catholic parochial schools in the post-war period, may also have contributed to the decision for some parents, as it did for mine.

The school's origins as a country house meant that the vestibule was small in comparison with those found in buildings designed specifically for educational purposes. The walls were papered in a homely flowered chintz design and the two parlours leading off the vestibule were decorated in similar English country patterns. The vestibule was uncluttered, containing neither pictures of past principals nor a place for a receptionist. A large wooden 'striking clock' stood at one side and some small paintings, including a landscape, adorned the walls, but two items dominated: a large painting known as 'Sancta Magdalena Sophia', and a statue of Jesus as a child. The former shows three Kerever Park children speaking with the foundress of the Society, Saint Madeleine Sophie. A small table bearing a vase of flowers stood underneath the painting, and the statue was also on a table with flowers placed near it—adding a shrine-like quality to the display. On walking through the vestibule, your eye was drawn past the painting to the grand staircase that led up to the chapel and dormitories. The wall beside these stairs bore a large painting of the Sacred Heart—an image of Jesus with his exposed heart surrounded by a circle of thorns and flames, symbolising his suffering on the cross (the circle of thorns) and his immense love for the world (the flames). The doorway to the children's dining-room was tucked away beside the base of the stairs, opposite the Sancta Magdalena Sophia painting, so that each time the children left the dining-room or went to the chapel they passed the picture.

## A hierarchical system

The statue of the child Jesus and the picture of Madeleine Sophie speaking with three children conveyed messages that the school was about educating young children. The adaptation of these two symbols to reflect childhood, and the intimacy of the vestibule, illustrated a desire on the part of the school to present a home-like quality, but one that reflected the values and

aspirations of the middle-class families from which most of the children came.

The English gentleman of Victorian times desired his house to be ‘a temple not of taste but of domestic virtues’, designed for family life and accessible only to family and friends.<sup>19</sup> Such a house was divided into two separate spheres—family and servants<sup>20</sup>—and the hierarchical social relations of Kerever Park reflected a similar arrangement. There were a number of older religious who had longstanding authority at Kerever Park. They were all very much individuals and managed, within the confines of religious life in that period, to make their mark on the school. They were afforded relative freedom and authority by virtue either of their position or of their age and the amount of time they had spent at the school. The young religious of the community, by contrast, were strictly supervised and allowed little freedom.

Overseeing the religious community, and responsible for its spiritual well-being, was the Mother Superior. Helen Boydell fulfilled this role for much of the school’s life. She was the daughter of a well-to-do Anglican family which boasted an archbishop. Helen had a great love of gardening and at Kerever Park she spent most of her time pursuing this interest: she was usually found in gumboots working amongst the bulbs and flowering annuals, and her efforts once helped the garden win first place in the annual Bowral garden competition. One religious remembered arriving at the school to take up her first teaching position. She finally found Mother Boydell in the garden, reported in, and asked her what to do. ‘Get the wheelbarrow for me!’ was the reply.

Second in command was the Mistress General, who ran the school rather as a school principal would. Lillian McGee retained this position for the entire period of the school’s operation. From a working-class background, she had a keen intellect and was a skilled pianist. When the Society established Sancta Sophia College as a residential college for female students at Sydney University in 1923, a number of the religious went there to undertake a first degree. Lillian had hoped that she too might be accorded this privilege, but it wasn’t to be. Instead, in her fifties she was assigned to Kerever Park and she remained there for virtually the rest of her life. Religious life in that period meant that there was no questioning of a directive from the superiors. Apparently Lillian accepted her position, but a number of the religious I interviewed suspected that she must have been disappointed about not going to university. She had a reputation as an excellent teacher and, as Kerever Park was a small school, it became a final training ground for young religious just out of the novitiate: under her direction, they were educated to be good teachers and community members. Some were able to establish rewarding relationships with Lillian and so

benefited from her wisdom and experience; others did not find favour and their time at Kerever Park was painful. The social order of the community at the time meant that those in authority were seen as synonymous with God: their orders were to be obeyed without question. As the religious were only allowed to talk with each other in the course of their duties, there were no opportunities to band together and form an alliance. Even in the short daily recreation time the religious spent together, all conversation was directed through the Mistress General or the Mother Superior. Indeed, in the last years of the school, Lillian McGee was both Mistress General and Mother Superior, giving her complete control.

There were two other significant religious. One was Mother Carolina Patena, who also taught at the school for twenty-two years. Of Italian background and very pious, she ran the infant classes in a flamboyant yet strict manner and the children were generally scared of her. The Mistress of Discipline, also a significant position although subordinate to the Mistress General, was in charge of directing the children in their day-to-day activities outside class time. This role was given to a number of different religious over the school’s history.

### Choir nuns and lay sisters

According to the Society’s constitutions of 1922, ‘The Society is composed of two classes of person, those destined for teaching and those who are to be employed in household duties.’<sup>21</sup> When young women joined the Society they could become choir nuns, who were directly involved in educational work, usually as teachers. (They were called ‘choir nuns’ because one of their duties was to sing Office, the community prayer of adoration sung three times a day.) Alternatively, they could become lay sisters, who were called ‘coadjutrix sisters’ (helpers). This distinction arose in western monasticism during the Middle Ages, when a differentiation was made between the *oblats* (who had been placed in the monastery by their parents to be educated) and the *conversi* (who entered later in life and were uneducated). A similar development took place in women’s religious orders, with lay sisters employed to leave the ‘choir nuns’ free for the Office, mental prayer, and intellectual pursuits. This practice continued in some modern religious congregations founded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the lay sisters being considered ‘in a class inferior to that of the choir religious’.<sup>22</sup>

A woman who entered as a choir nun had approximately two and a half years of training. This involved instruction in the Society’s constitution, spiritual exercises and spiritual reading, as well as teacher training in the second year. Those who joined as lay sisters immediately began their work

in the house, with little time given to study and training, thus receiving little education in either their formative or subsequent years as a religious, at least until the tiered system ended in 1965 as a result of Vatican Two.

The relationship between the choir nuns and lay sisters may be thought of as both hierarchical and symbiotic. As we have seen, it was hierarchical in that the lay sisters were considered inferior to the choir nuns; it was symbiotic to the extent that each category was partly defined by the other. Indeed, Janet Erskine Stuart, Superior General of the Society from 1911 until 1914, commented in her 1923 book *The Society of the Sacred Heart* that, 'We know that we could not do without each other.'<sup>23</sup> Her description of the lay sisters as uneducated and shrewd, with distinct personalities, reflects the perspective of the choir nuns expressed in a number of documents: 'They have not been filed down into uniformity by school-books and exercises.'<sup>24</sup> In her inversion of the subordinate position of the uneducated sisters, and her suggestion that a degree of individuality may have arisen from their very lack of education, there is at work a process of glorification—an attempt to make something common appear more splendid than it is here:

Why should they be refused? They are our sisters and friends greatly in honour, often patterns of religious perfection, and happier in their circumstances, perhaps, than many choir religious, for whom, as 'the poor Mothers' they often express genuine sympathy and feeling. Un-distracted as they are from spiritual interests by occupations that do not absorb their whole attention, they often attain a high degree of interior recollection, and their unburdened memory is singularly tenacious of all good and beautiful things that they hear.<sup>25</sup>

Glorification was also employed in one of the six interviews I conducted with choir nuns who had worked at the school. This religious recollected that a lay sister told her she felt 'sorry' for the choir nuns because they had to concentrate on their work with the children whereas she was free to continue her meditations while undertaking domestic work.<sup>26</sup>

Attempts to glorify the position of any group in a lower social position than ourselves is a way of attributing to its members a status we are not prepared or able to offer them in a formal or ongoing way. This is especially so when we say that we practise equality in social relationships: it allows us to feel comfortable about others' lower status by temporarily promoting it above our own. We then act in a way which confirms their real status. For example, the romantic concept of the 'noble savage' was applied by Europeans to Australian Aborigines in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries even as they were destroying that culture.

Erskine Stuart's allusions to equality in social relationships within the Society are mirrored in a number of documents. Margaret Williams, an

American member of the Society and author of a 1978 history of the congregation, argued against the perpetuation of distinctions that arose in a different epoch.<sup>27</sup> Whenever a tradition is invoked long after its establishment, meanings appropriate to the new place and time must be found.<sup>28</sup> Looking back on the origins of the tiered system in the nineteenth century, Williams spoke from a later twentieth-century perspective in which equality was a significant ideal. Implicit in the writing of Williams and Erskine Stuart is a need to justify the system, yet neither offers any explanation as to why it persisted well into the twentieth century. Perhaps the temporary elevation of the uneducated sister above the educated choir nun was a way of trying to reconcile conflicting beliefs—hierarchical social position, based on education, versus equality.

The language used between choir nuns and sisters also illustrates the entrenched hierarchical relationship. The choir nuns called one another 'sister' until they took their final vows after ten years, henceforth becoming 'mother'. The lay sisters referred to all choir nuns, irrespective of age—even those who had just joined the Society and had not taken any vows—as 'mother'.<sup>29</sup> These distinctions were not confined to the Society: the Dominican, Mercy, Brigidine, Loretto and Ursuline congregations also used the tiered system and maintained social distance between choir nuns and lay sisters. For example, in the Ursuline congregation the sisters ate separately, were the last to go to communion (following the young novices) and were required to sit on the floor in the weekly Chapter of Faults ritual when members publicly confess their sins. This last practice was particularly difficult for elderly lay sisters. The Ursuline sisters accepted that their position was in accordance with God's wishes for them, although they did resist meanings used to justify it—such as describing it as a 'humble' vocation, which one sister took to mean they were 'a little stupid'.<sup>30</sup> All were glad to see the end of the system in the 1960s.

The tiered system reproduced the class structure of the nineteenth century. The Society was founded in 1800, when there was a sharp division between those who were wealthy and educated and those who were neither. The families of religious were expected to contribute a dowry to the congregation, but many women who wanted to join came from families who could not afford such a donation. Admitting uneducated, poor women as lay sisters allowed them a form of membership whereby they substituted domestic work for a financial contribution. They were not allowed to teach in the expensive boarding schools, although some did teach in the parochial schools run by the Society in other countries. Williams notes that, after the first generation of religious, most vocations within the Society were from the middle class, a trend which narrowed recruitment even while the Society was spreading and resulted in a reputation for exclusiveness.<sup>31</sup> It

seems likely that part of the reason for the continuance of the class structure within the Society was that the majority of religious were from a background which had accustomed them to having domestic servants. Indeed, I discovered that most of the religious who staffed Kerever Park had domestic assistance in their families of origin.<sup>32</sup> A second explanation may have been financial, a cheap domestic workforce being needed in order to make the boarding schools accessible to as many families as possible. Williams records no evidence of attempts to extend the learning of those sisters who might have sought teaching as a career yet were barred from it because of their lack of education. In fact, the reference in the constitutions of the Society to ‘those destined for teaching, and those who are to be employed in household duties’ suggests a determinist view of such distinctions.<sup>33</sup> My research indicates that there was no attempt to further the education of the sisters at the time that Kerever Park was open; in fact, it seems to have been discouraged.<sup>34</sup>

In the theological explanation for the tiered system, it is referred to as a vocation ‘marked by simplicity, by humble, hidden service like that of Nazareth’ (referring to the humble origins of Jesus).<sup>35</sup> As described in Chapter 7, this same explanation was offered by Patricia, a lay sister I interviewed, who drew on the idea of expressing her love for God through the sacrifice and suffering that came from doing menial work. Williams’ argument that the reason the sisters were accepted into this vocation was due to their lack of education does not seem adequate for all the sisters who were employed at Kerever Park. Evelyn Stewart, who served at the school for seventeen years, was a qualified primary teacher before she entered the Society in England; Agnes O’Connell had taught in parish schools in New Zealand before coming to Australia.<sup>36</sup> It is, of course, also possible that these sisters directly sought such a role for their own reasons, which may have included a desire for reparation—taking on voluntary suffering to make up to God for the sins of the world. This tradition is articulated by Williams with reference to the aristocratic Pauline de Saint André de la Laurencie de Villeneuve who, in the nineteenth century, sought to make herself ‘a victim for expiation’ for the ‘scandals’ of her family by becoming a lay sister.<sup>37</sup> Another explanation is that some relatively uneducated women were directed to become lay sisters by those in authority in the Society, who considered that their educational and social background was more in keeping with domestic work than with teaching in the more exclusive boarding schools.

The sisters lived a separate life from the choir nuns. Generally they had little contact with the children, although some sisters were given supervisory responsibilities in the study room, in recreation periods and in the

dormitories. They took their community recreation and spiritual reading time apart from the choir nuns, typically joining them only for meals and for recreation on Sundays. The work the sisters undertook was physically hard. At Kerever Park, four sisters were allocated various duties under the direction of a choir nun: they cooked three meals a day for at least seventy people, did laundry and ironing for the same number, and cleaned and cared for the sick (a woman did come in on a daily basis to assist them with some cleaning). In addition, their work was sometimes performed under difficult circumstances. Once, when a new kitchen was being built, they washed up in buckets outside in winter. Few young women were attracted to this vocation: the sisters were generally middle-aged or older, which meant that their duties were even more physically challenging.<sup>38</sup>

Erskine Stuart’s belief that uneducated sisters were freed to be ‘singularly tenacious of all good and beautiful things’ is not entirely in keeping with reports from those associated with Kerever Park, such as Charles and Enid Stevenson, who were employed at the school. They laughed when they recalled how one of the sisters used to sit in a spot she had created for herself in the hen-house and read the paper. Only the Mother Superior was allowed access to newspapers (she did provide small cuttings for the religious to read),<sup>39</sup> so the sister in question must have taken the paper from the rubbish bin. Apparently she cut a small peep-hole in the hen-house wall so that she could read unobserved yet still spot unexpected visitors. Sisters also broke the rules in other ways. One religious reported that they often gave extra food to the young religious and offered them emotional support, which, in her understanding was probably not the done thing.<sup>40</sup> In her written reminiscences of her time at Kerever Park, lay sister Evelyn Stewart remembered once reading a storybook to the children at night when the lights failed. A choir nun intervened and replaced the storybook with biographies of Saint Alphonsus Liguoris and Saint Dominic. ‘Just too bad!’ was Evelyn’s view of this intrusion.<sup>41</sup>

### Ancillary staff

Charles Stevenson worked outside at Kerever Park, while Enid assisted the sisters indoors. Charles became the property manager in 1945, under the direction of Helen Boydell. Eighteen months later, he and his wife were offered accommodation in a small cottage in the school grounds. The couple remained at the school until the end of 1951, when Charles left as he didn’t ‘see eye to eye’ with Mother Boydell. Contrary to her ideas, he believed that there was a need to purchase some large farming equipment such as a tractor and a truck. The school at the time had no large mechanical tools.

He returned at the beginning of 1957 at the request of Mother Lillian McGee, who was then in charge, and remained until a year after the official closure of the school in 1965. On his return in 1957 the requested vehicles were purchased.<sup>42</sup>

Charles reported that the school was a real family in that he ‘felt needed’, was invited to special events, handled the money for the religious on their rare visits to town, and represented the school at local funerals. The Stevensons noted, however, that they had little contact with the children. ‘I kept my place. If the girls spoke to me, I spoke to them’, commented Charles, and Enid agreed that this applied in her case also. Other comments they made also indicate that the nature of this ‘family’ was hierarchical and tantamount to a class system: the couple felt that they were treated fairly and generously for their hard work and loyalty, yet were kept at a social distance. Charles was referred to neither as ‘Charlie’ nor as ‘Mister’ but as ‘Stevenson’—a usage reminiscent of the relationship between master and servant. The rule of enclosure (whereby the religious were only allowed to leave the grounds of the convent if accompanied by another religious, and for serious reasons) added to the social distance. The religious were not allowed to enter the grounds of the cottage in which the Stevensons lived, and when the couple’s first child was born the religious did not visit or pay the child any attention until it was baptised.<sup>43</sup>

### ‘A garden paradise’?

In the 1960s Bernard Smith, art historian and cultural theorist, analysed the complex process of cultural exchange between England and Australia. He argued against viewing cultural imperialism as a one-way process—England influencing Australian culture—instead proposing that while it is an unequal process the colonial partners do affect the dominant culture, however obliquely.<sup>44</sup> Such thoughts were not dominant in the 1940s and 1950s, however, and Kerever Park illustrates the persistence of a ‘nostalgia of vision’<sup>45</sup> since early colonial times, underpinned by notions of Australia being purely a reflection of Britain.

The theme of safety associated with the school’s war-time beginnings continued to resonate in articles published in *Cor Unum*, the Society’s journal of its Australian schools. Fear of invading forces no longer being an issue, the emphasis shifted to the security afforded by the practices of the English upper classes: country living, riding lessons, charitable works, singing, poetry, dancing lessons, needlework, drawing, staged plays, French lessons and ‘charge’ duties such as being president in the dining-room.<sup>46</sup> The English connection is directly stated in the first article published about

Kerever Park, in 1945–6: ‘Start off up the garden path with its border of daffodils, freesias and grape hyacinths; turn to the right where it branches, and find yourself in view of the house’s home-like gables, its broad verandahs and the lovely English trees that shelter it.’<sup>47</sup> The idea of being sheltered by England is not surprising given this was during the Second World War. Yet Australia’s involvement in Europe had significantly influenced the way in which the war project was conducted.

There is sense of both nostalgia and unreality in the *Cor Unum* article. Its nostalgic tone possibly reflects early aspirations for the school, but also suggests both the security of childhood and the safety of an English setting. While Mother McGuinness may have used her childhood experiences as a way of entering a child’s perspective, there is no indication of such a process being employed by the anonymous author (presumably a member of the religious community)—no suggestion that the children might experience difficulties or complexities beyond the occasional minor scratch. The journal had an intended audience of current and ex- students, and prospective parents. No doubt, parents would have been reassured by the emphasis on family life, the notions of happy childhood and of continuity between the Society’s institutions:

Turn off that quiet country road into a still more peaceful path that ends near a gaily painted iron gate with neat brick pillars . . . Something familiar about that gate? Yes, of course! Successor to the old green wooden one, and forerunner of the present handsome grille, it admitted generations of children to Rose Bay. So, right from the outset, we find that Kerever Park is but Rose Bay transplanted and grown young, with a charm of personality that is all its own.<sup>48</sup>

The article continues in idealised mode, with the children finding only happiness and success in this setting. At night, they are cared for as they might be by a mother: a religious tucks them into bed, attends to their bodily ailments and manages to teach a simple French lesson in the process. More often than not, the mother the religious replaces is an ex-student of one of the Society’s schools.<sup>49</sup> Life is sunny; there is no room for dissenting voices. At the heart of this description is, as feminist theorist Madeleine Grumet expresses it, ‘the careful balance of order and disorder, the planned and the spontaneous’, the Renaissance concept of *sprezzatura*—the art of presenting achievement without seeming effort—which ‘is embodied in the grace and ease of the happy childhood’.<sup>50</sup> Similar *Cor Unum* articles followed, all communicating an intimate lifestyle made possible by the small-scale setting: the chance for close attention from a religious at bed-time, riding lessons, interaction with farm animals, and small classes. Indeed, a photograph of kindergarten and first class (called Tenth and Elementary classes in the European manner) reveals a total of just ten children in both classes.

The idea of a happy and innocent childhood, secreted away from the demands of everyday life, took strong root in the school's early existence. The genre was well entrenched in English culture: mothers of the nineteenth century were advised in Mrs Beeton's much-consulted book on household management to make their children feel 'that home is the happiest place in the world'.<sup>51</sup> And this sentiment again had currency in the 1950s: Australian historian Ester Faye writes that 'in a terrifying fiction . . . of safety and happiness' during the post-war period, children became the repositories of hopes, desires and fantasies for a world free from the forces of hatred and fear which had driven the war years. Democracy had won and in the new social order that rose from the ashes of the war, children would be happy as well as innocent and safe from such traumas; they would also provide the building blocks of the continued victory of democracy.<sup>52</sup> Statistics for the birth rate in the post-war period into the 1960s reveal that men and women married at an earlier age and there was a higher rate of child-bearing.<sup>53</sup> Although women had been mobilised into the armed forces during the Second World War, the post-war period included a return to the notion that a woman's central vocation was in the home.<sup>54</sup>

That a writer in the post-war period might express the cultural fantasies which characterised the *Cor Unum* articles is not surprising. On the other hand, it might be hoped that a later time and historical perspective would produce a different view—yet the idyll persists even in more recent writing. Margaret Williams' history of the Society contains a brief reference to Kerever Park in which she continues the 'antechamber of heaven' theme, casting it as a 'garden paradise'.<sup>55</sup> An Australian member of the Society, Leila Barlow, in her 1982 history of Rose Bay Convent refers to Kerever Park in similar terms, describing it as an 'ideal milieu' in which future Rose Bay students could be educated in Madeleine Sophie's tradition: 'awareness of being loved, freedom to be oneself and education through a happy collaboration in work and play'.<sup>56</sup> Barlow does not discuss how she arrived at this judgement, and no reference is made to any interviews having been conducted with past students. Here, the focus has shifted from 'innocence' towards a notion of goodness, which happens when the child is educated in an appropriate environment. Kerever Park is judged to have succeeded in achieving its early goals: the creation of a preparatory school in a happy and secure country setting, the children being exposed at an early age to the Sacred Heart tradition with Mother McGee providing the family focus as a mother figure. In Barlow's history there is no hint of any conflict between a desire to make Kerever Park a happy home for young children where a child was 'free to be oneself', and the demands of the educational practices of the Society.

## Safety and gender

The theme of safety was taken up in the interviews I conducted with nine ex-students. Those sent to Kerever Park in the early years spoke about the school being a war-time sanctuary.<sup>57</sup> Safety was also discussed by students of the school well after the war had ended, who variously described the setting as 'sheltered . . . protected from outside influences',<sup>58</sup> a 'haven',<sup>59</sup> and 'safe'.<sup>60</sup>

The safety they spoke of was grounded in the physical environment of the house and garden, the implication being that what lay beyond the school boundaries was not safe. Students were confined to the school grounds largely due to the rules of enclosure that governed the lives of the religious. These rules did not, however, apply to the priests who ran Chevalier College, the nearby Catholic boys' school, or to its students. A history of Tudor House, the nearby Anglican preparatory school for boys, reveals a similar freedom: in it, a number of male ex-students remembered the school (also a large country home in an English-style landscape) as a place of safety, but they also recalled activities outside the school boundaries.<sup>61</sup> There are many pictures attesting to these activities—bicycling in the countryside, sailing on the local dam, scouting, and skiing. In contrast, the students of Kerever Park remained within the school grounds except for outings with parents and relatives.

The dangers of life outside the school grounds were reinforced by a tragic incident in the late 1950s. Chevalier College was built on the main road at the end of the lane that led to Kerever Park. Some of the students at Kerever Park had brothers who boarded at the school. The students' activities outside the school included swimming in the Wingecarribee River; I remember hearing the boys calling to each other as they made their way there on Saturday afternoons. One weekend the boys went to the river, crossing Kerever Park land to get to their favourite swimming hole; there two of them drowned. This event was described to us by the religious, probably with the intention of discouraging us from going down to the out-of-bounds river: however, the story also brought understandings beyond those of safety. As well as the fear that the news of the drownings engendered, I remember the envy I felt when I heard the Chevalier boys on their way to the river. For another ex-student it prompted awareness of a conflict between male freedom and female safety:<sup>62</sup> girls might want the freedom enjoyed by boys, but it had its dangers and costs.

The contrasting lives of Kerever Park students and those at the boys' schools demonstrate the power of long-standing constructions about the roles of men and women. A woman's body, particularly her sexual and

reproductive functions, encouraged the assigning to her of qualities thought to be naturally associated with child-rearing and domesticity. On the other hand, what was seen as the essence of a man's nature—his rationality—was constructed as 'self-contained' and this gave him certain politico-economic rights in cultural institutions such as the law, education and the Church.<sup>63</sup> The contained nature of life at Kerever Park sent messages to the female students about their place in the private world of the family. These messages had their origins in nineteenth-century understandings: country life was seen as protective of female chastity;<sup>64</sup> and the 'sense of domestic enclosure' engendered in a country setting provided an appropriate setting for the delivery of education to women.<sup>65</sup> Both notions reinforce traditional gender roles even while education, with its emancipatory potential, is being offered.<sup>66</sup> This illustrates a theme which persists amongst women in the twenty-first century—the conflicting demands of love (expressed within family life) and freedom (expressed by a career in the wider world).<sup>67</sup>

The physical boundaries of the school also illustrated the ongoing enclave mentality of Catholics and their educational institutions in that period. The school borders kept the culture of Catholicism intact by stopping students mixing with non-Catholics who might dilute their faith. They also delineated the Anglo-Celtic nature of the world within: the post-war period in Australia saw an influx of large numbers of eastern and southern European immigrants, but at Kerever Park students who belonged to an ethnic minority were few. A number of ex-students told me that they struggled in adulthood with the legacy of fear that was prompted by both the physical setting and educational culture of the school.

### Dual vision

The school also reflected contemporary concern with ideas about national identity. Myths and memories associated with landscape are tenacious,<sup>68</sup> yet these meanings are not aroused in the 'untutored' mind: our understandings of landscape must be educated through stories, myths, histories, poetry and music.<sup>69</sup> The Australian landscape was alien to early white settlers, so there was a need to make it familiar and ultimately to incorporate it as symbolic of the nation.<sup>70</sup> The anglicised landscape of the Southern Highlands illustrates this, representing both a resistance to the local landscape and a harking back to British culture.

Bernard Smith has argued that being European–Australian 'means of necessity carrying peripheral vision, and dual vision, mixed identity and citizenship or lineage'<sup>71</sup> as we identify both with our country of origin and with our country of location. The placement of a European garden at the

front of Kerever Park and the view of the Australian bush at the back provides a material symbol of this ambivalence. Similarly, the English orientation of the curriculum of Australian schools of the period, with just some Australian literature and poetry, reflected a cultural hierarchy. Smith argues that in our modern society we live 'on the edges of the continent, looking out and away from the red centre and heart, missing something peculiarly Aboriginal about our identity, therefore feeling hopelessly homeless—or so the story goes.'<sup>72</sup> The intersection of class and gender indicates a similar duality: in Australia, being a 'lady' means being in a class 'somewhere above where you are now', with a standard that remains British. There were conflicting messages here for Australian girls learning at the same time about their nationality and their colonial inferiority.<sup>73</sup>

Part of an interview I conducted with one ex-student powerfully illustrated Smith's notion of dual vision:

If you had the right aspect or a window you could look all the way down along a rural vista of paddocks, down the slope, down towards the river . . . and in the far distance, you couldn't actually see it because there was a railway track but you could, at night, hear the train . . . That train, that was a symbol of the outside world and it was beautiful. It comforted me because this was rural and I came from the country and I loved gum trees and the landscape and the grass and the smell of the lawn . . . if it hadn't had that environment, the homesickness would have been ten times more difficult to cope with, I think. Then there was a cottage garden out the front. Hedges and hollyhocks and tulips and tremendously wonderfully European . . . Our garden at home was all burrs, no proper water, grasshoppers, miserable garden. Here I was in a European garden with rich soil, tulips and so on, that I had to look in picture books of England or Holland to see the likes of. So Kerever Park had these tremendous, wonderful, magnificent, exotic trees, not Australian, very exotic. So out one side you got Australia and on the other side there was this wonderful European view.<sup>74</sup>

The narratives of other ex-students and teachers pointed up the English orientation of the curriculum at Kerever Park,<sup>75</sup> which, in keeping with most schools of the period, also omitted the study of indigenous culture. That omission has left a feeling of loss in adulthood for a number of ex-students.<sup>76</sup>

Peter Beilharz, in his exploration of Smith's ideas, concludes that 'the cult of the pastoral weighs heavily; and in this regard, white Australian civilisation owes more to its English past than to its American future'.<sup>77</sup> The physical setting of Kerever Park expressed notions of cultural imperialism, nostalgia of vision, middle-class attitudes towards gender and class, religious exclusiveness, and a dualistic view of national identity. While there was a desire to provide a more home-like environment than that of Rose Bay Convent, this sat in conflict with the longstanding educational practices of the Society.