

# The ones that got away

## Four women from the Department of Physiology and what they did next

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This article had its genesis in research undertaken in the University of Melbourne Archives for the book *Life's logic: 150 years of physiology at the University of Melbourne*, which will be published at the end of 2012.<sup>1</sup> It looks at the professional lives of four women associated in the early part of their careers between 1930 and 1950 with the Department of Physiology, who all went on to become better known outside it.

The Department of Anatomy, Physiology and Pathology at the University of Melbourne, headed by Professor George Britton Halford, was set up in 1862, thus establishing the first medical school in Australia.<sup>2</sup> Halford was an early and determined champion of the right of women to study medicine, going so far as to refuse to participate in the 1871 matriculation ceremony when his proposal to allow women who passed the relevant examinations to sign the matriculation book was blocked by the University Council. Women medical students were not enrolled until 1880. Despite Halford's early support, during its first half-century women feature in the history of the Department of Physiology only as cleaners, people whose very names the university rarely bothered to get right. Mrs Bridget Peck for example, who cleaned the floors and scrubbed

the benches for many years during the 1860s and 'signed' her pay chits with a cross, was variously identified in pay records as Mrs Peek, Peck or Pick.

Today the Department of Physiology counts many distinguished women among its alumnae and includes many women in senior positions, including professors Lea Delbridge and Mary Wlodek and several research fellows whose professional lives are directed towards that discipline. The first half of the 20th century, however, saw the appointment of a cohort of women who played significant roles in the department, but made their names elsewhere and in other capacities. Researching their careers led me to a number of fortuitous discoveries in the University of Melbourne Archives, notably of photographs that had not, as far as I could tell, been published. I was also lucky enough, since some of the women are still alive, to obtain other good-quality photographs taken when these women worked in the department, which are published here for the first time and will be available to future users of the archives.

Aficionados of University of Melbourne history may already be familiar with the engaging accounts by Audrey Cahn and Rosie Agar of the 'University children', offspring

of academics who, until the 1950s, occupied some of the houses along Professors' Walk.<sup>3</sup> Audrey Josephine Cahn (1905–2008) was the eldest child of Professor William Alexander Osborne (1873–1967) and Ethel Elizabeth Goodson Osborne (1882–1968) of physiology, and Rosie Agar's great-grandfather Wilfred Eade Agar (1882–1951) was professor of zoology, living in the university grounds until 1948. Her grandfather, Wilfred Talbot Agar (1910–2000), was a senior member of the Physiology Department from 1945 to 1966 and one of the children who treated the university campus as their own backyard.

Audrey Osborne Cahn especially painted a picture of mingled privilege and isolation among the group of children living in the houses facing Professors' Row (leading from Grattan Street to what is now the staff club, University House, which was first the residence of Professor Nanson and finally that of Professor Hartung) or those along Tin Alley, which runs from Swanston Street to Royal Parade. The privilege derived from access to the safe and extensive playground that the university grounds—patrolled by Mr Norris, the long-suffering and much-teased policeman—provided. The children were somewhat isolated,

Women's Hockey Team, University of Melbourne (including Ethel Osborne), c. 1909–11, black and white photographic print, 20.0 x 15.0 cm. UMA/I/2145, accession no. 1983.0022, University of Melbourne Photograph Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.



however, from their social peers, whom they later joined at private schools, and from the generally much rougher and poorer children in surrounding Carlton. They were even, in their early years, taught separately, in a mobile kindergarten set up in Professor Agar's house and staffed by Miss Fison, a daughter of the renowned anthropologist, journalist and Wesleyan missionary Lorimer Fison.<sup>4</sup> Miss Fison's classes continued until the 1930s, moving from the grounds to South Yarra.

The MacCallum girls later briefly attended a small, state-run 'rural school' in the grounds of the 1888 Melbourne Teachers' College (which was to become the Melbourne College of Advanced Education before amalgamating with the university in 1989). Some idea of the rural nature of the university grounds at that period can be gained from the fact that the area where the Biochemistry Building and Medical Centre now stand was cultivated with oats to feed the livestock on campus.

The children would also have been isolated from the surrounding Carlton families by differing parental expectations, the result of growing up in a middle-class, intellectually oriented enclave, surrounded by working-class people. For instance, Olive Agar recalled her mother, the wife of Professor Wilfred Eade Agar, telling her that it had never occurred to her to reward her children for good performance in their examinations as she 'never expected you would do anything else'.<sup>5</sup> The environment was not, however, as socially exclusive as may at first appear. Audrey Cahn also recalled the children of William Henry Preston (1896–1941), the anatomy technician who lived in a cottage in the grounds, as part of the group; one of his five children, Sidney Preston, graduated MBBS in 1938. In fact the family was to have a very long association with the university, with three generations living on campus. Another of William Henry Preston's children, Len Preston, was appointed technical assistant in 1932 and his son William (later a forensic scientist) started work as a technical assistant in the Pathology Department in 1953. All three generations of Prestons lived in the head technician's cottage in the grounds near Swanston Street. The building, located next door to the

Science Faculty at Old Geology, now houses the Disability Liaison Unit.<sup>6</sup>

The university families moved from house to house as people retired, died, left the university or had more children. Monica MacCallum, for example, a daughter of Professor Peter MacCallum, moved with her family from the Allens' house in Tin Alley, to Black Rock, and then back to the Osbornes' house at number 3, Professors' Row. In 1948 the Agar family were succeeded in their house 'Chanonry' (the house closest to Grattan Street) by the Trikojus family.

Dr Ethel Osborne, wife of W.A. Osborne, was the mother of a quartet of university children and managed a distinguished professional career in medicine and public health. Stranded in England during World War I, she worked for the Health of Munition Workers' Committee and the Industrial Fatigue Research Board. Once qualified in medicine, she worked at both the Women's and Queen Victoria hospitals as well as serving as a foundation member of the council of Emily Macpherson College.<sup>7</sup> She was also heavily involved in other university activities as shown by the picture (page 45) of the University Women's Hockey Team, taken between 1909 and 1911, just a few years after the family arrived in Melbourne.

Ethel Osborne and her husband had four children: Audrey, about whom we shall hear later, Gerard, Yrsa and Charis. Gerard Osborne, BAgr Sc, OBE (1908–1983), had a distinguished career with Kraft, of which he was chairman from 1953 to 1972; Yrsa (1913–1995) followed her mother into medicine, winning many awards including the Embley Memorial Medal in anaesthetics and the Douglas Stephens Prize in diseases of children, and graduating in 1937. She married the distinguished physician Clive Fitts (1890–1984), whose library she donated on his death to the Royal Australasian College of Physicians and the University of Melbourne Library. She was a keen dry-fly trout fisher and gardener. Charis (1920–2006) married Edwin Pelling in 1941. She served as a councillor for the Shire of Eltham from 1961 to 1971 and was president from 1962 to 1963. In 1965, with councillor John Lewis, she represented the shire at the meeting called to form the Heidelberg Regional Library Service. In 1967, on the formation of the Shire of Eltham Historical Society, she served as its foundation president.<sup>8</sup>

Although Yrsa Osborne would have taken physiology as part of her medical course, it was her elder sister, Audrey, who distinguished herself in

the field of biochemistry and dietetics after working in the Department of Physiology for a short part of her very long career. When she took her Bachelor of Agricultural Science in 1928, Audrey was the first female graduate of the course. In 1930 she won the M.A. Bartlett Scholarship in Physiology, worth £100, with another £5 to be used for her research or apparatus. She was working on fat particles of milk. In 1931 she was



Anthea, Clarence and Diana Dyason, c. 1930–49. Accession no. 1989.0049, box 13, Diana Dyason Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.



awarded £100 for a project entitled 'Dimensions and other physical properties of fat particles'. Like her brother Gerard, Audrey Cahn (she married Leslie Cahn, an architect, in 1930) worked at Kraft, although only occasionally. During World War II, in Melbourne, she worked as chief dietician at the Heidelberg Military Hospital. From 1947 until her retirement in 1968 she was employed at the university, first as lecturer and then senior lecturer in nutrition and applied dietetics. She was an early advocate of lowering the intake of fats and substituting polyunsaturated fatty acids for saturated fats. In collaboration with the Anatomy Department, she participated in a 17-year longitudinal study of child growth in Melbourne (1954–71), which in turn fed into an international comparative atlas of growth. Audrey Cahn Street in the ACT suburb of Macgregor was named in her honour in March 2011.<sup>9</sup> The photograph opposite of Audrey Cahn, which also appears in her book *University children*, was provided by her family and is now in the University of Melbourne Archives digital collection.

Collections of family papers in the archives are often a good source of unexpected images and one of the best is the collection of

Diana Joan Dyason (1919–1989). Properly speaking Ding Dyason was not a 'University child' as she did not live in the grounds, but her lifelong association with those who did, combined with her care in collecting and retaining records, make her papers an invaluable historical resource. She was the niece of professor of history Ernest Scott and the daughter of the mining engineer, economist and stockbroker Edward Clarence Dyason, who had a long and close relationship with many of the academic staff. As a consequence Ding, her sister Anthea (known as Tansy) and elder brother John spent much of their leisure time on campus. She recalled playing by the lake while her father lectured to commerce students.

Diana Dyason began her academic career in the Department of Physiology and it is from that early period of her career that this photograph of her with her father and sister (above) can be dated. Dyason took her BSc in 1943 and MSc two years later, with first-class honours and an exhibition. Working with R.D. ('Pansy') Wright as a research assistant and later senior demonstrator, she recalled her early research into malaria in somewhat frustrated terms, noting, in her memoir for Hume Dow, that she did

not know of any other graduate student who had worked so hard for such negative results. Her research was to prove that many species of birds and bats did not harbour the malaria parasite.<sup>10</sup> Valuable though this research was, Diana Dyason is remembered principally for her pioneering work in the history of science and medicine in Australia. Encouraged by Wright, who set up a Department of General Science, from 1946 Dyason gave classes in the history and methods of science and medicine and in 1950 moved to take up a lectureship in the renamed Department of History and Methods of Science. In 1957 the department was again renamed, this time as the Department of History and Philosophy of Science. Dyason was its head from 1957 to 1975.

One of Ding Dyason's most acclaimed courses was 'Glorious Smelbourne' in which she collaborated with Danny Spooner, the folk musician.<sup>11</sup> The teaching material consisted of two volumes of source material and an accompanying cassette. The course, on public health and particularly the sewerage of Melbourne, was immensely popular.<sup>12</sup> The photograph of Ding Dyason with Spooner (page 48) dates from this period in the 1970s.



Left: Ding Dyason and Danny Spooner, c. 1970s. Box 11, Diana Dyason Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.

Below: Monica MacCallum, c. 1945–50. Collection of Monica MacCallum.

Dyason was foundation president of the Australasian Association for the History, Philosophy and Social Studies of Science. She was also an accomplished painter, principally in watercolour. Any researcher of the history of science and public health at the university has reason to be grateful for Dyason's indefatigable attempts to improve the library's collections. Her private collection was extremely extensive, so extensive in fact that as well as having shelves of books in every room of her house, she built a special library with compactus shelving to accommodate it. After her death, over 100 useful and valuable volumes came to the University of Melbourne Library and many more to the departmental one which was renamed the Diana Dyason Library in her honour and where her portrait by Wes Walters was displayed until the department moved from the Old Arts Building in around 2007.

Ding Dyason's long-time colleague in the Departments of both Physiology and History and Philosophy of Science, her biographer in the *Australian dictionary of biography* and friend, Monica MacCallum (born 1921), was a true 'University child'. MacCallum's family moved into and out of the grounds over time, but spent many years living at what the Staff

Branch records described as '3, The University'. This had not been her first university address and the family's introduction to life within the grounds cannot have been easy for her parents. Richard Selleck tells the story.<sup>13</sup> When Professor Harry Allen fell ill in 1924 and it was clear that he would not be able to resume his duties, the university appointed Peter MacCallum to the chair of pathology, assuming that the Allens would relinquish their university house. The MacCallum family arrived in 1924, but they were unable to take up residence on campus until after Sir Harry's death in 1926. Until then, they were accommodated in the Windsor Hotel and then in Parkville.

During World War II, Monica MacCallum worked in the Munitions Supply Laboratories at Maribyrnong. From 1944 to 1950, when she resigned to go overseas, she was employed in the Physiology Department in a variety of research assistant and demonstrator positions, publishing several papers in the *Australian Journal of Experimental Biology and Medical Science* with Frank Shaw and others. On her return from England, MacCallum took a position in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science in 1959. She was the fledgling department's first honours graduate



and her research work was principally concerned with Charles Darwin. She is also a notable contributor to the *Australian dictionary of biography*. Our photograph (above) shows her around the time of her employment in the Department of Physiology, dressed probably, as she notes herself, for the walk to church.

The last woman we will consider connected with the Department of Physiology was in no sense a 'University child', but she had a long and influential career in the

Meriel Wilmot at Ian Kelton's farewell, 1948. Accession no. 2006.0074, box 5, Diana Dyason Collection, University of Melbourne Archives. Meriel Wilmot is second from front on the left. Group from left to right: Monica MacCallum, Ivan de la Lande, Meriel Wilmot, unknown man (front), Geoffrey Bentley (at rear), Patricia Keogh, Ian Kelton, Diana Dyason.



department and an even more significant one afterwards. Now that even heads of departments conduct much of their work by email that they type themselves, it may be hard to remember the crucial role played by armies of typists, stenographers and secretaries in university departments before the 1980s. The secretary of a large department supervised the clerical workload of numerous staff, functioned as the professor's gatekeeper and was the first port of call for staff, students and sometimes parents seeking access to the professor or advice. The work was highly skilled, confidential and often extended well beyond normal working hours, involving not only traditional secretarial duties but also such tasks as organising accommodation for visiting dignitaries and researchers and meeting and greeting them on arrival. Many secretaries stayed in their positions for decades, becoming over the years the repository of an immense amount of administrative history and custom never formally recorded. For example, Gwyneth Williams (1917–2011) was secretary to four heads of the History Department from 1956 to 1975 and Edith Tobin (1908–1997) spent almost 40 years in the Department of Physiology, 20 of them as the secretary.

Tobin's predecessor, Meriel Wilmot-Wright (born 1921) had a very different career. She was two months short of 20 years old when she was appointed on 21 March 1941 as a typist. In 1947 she became the department secretary, in which position she remained until the end of 1953, when she left for London, taking a position as research officer with the Nuffield Provincial Hospitals Trust in 1954 and working with the Nuffield Foundation in 1955. She took her BA, majoring in French, in 1952. The photograph above, found in Ding Dyason's papers, was taken at Mario's restaurant in Exhibition Street in 1948. Following a visit to London by R.D. Wright, with whom she had had a longstanding relationship, Meriel Wilmot returned somewhat reluctantly to Australia, taking a position in the Department of Optometry in 1956 and leaving the university in 1961 to become the first executive secretary of the Myer Foundation. Meriel Wilmot and R.D. Wright were married in London in 1964 while she was visiting leading foundations in the United Kingdom and United States.

It was undoubtedly at the Myer Foundation that Meriel Wilmot-Wright made her most significant contribution. During her term,

the organisation established an international profile unlike that of any other Australian foundation. Michael Liffman, historian and himself a former chief executive officer of the foundation, noted that, 'Of all the qualities Wilmot brought to the Foundation, one shaped it more than any other: a seemingly unshakeable respect for the primacy of academic and intellectual endeavour and its application to social issues'.<sup>14</sup> She launched the 'Aborigines in Australian society' project investigating the effects of government policy upon the Indigenous population. Among the grants made during her final year with the foundation, Liffman notes the appreciation of emerging issues evident in the support extended to the Disability Resource Centre, the secretariat of the Victorian Legal Centre, Australia's first public television facility, Open Channel, and establishment of an Australian office of Earthwatch.

Meriel Wilmot-Wright was founding president of the Melbourne branch of Zonta International from 1966 to 1968 and became the first woman president of the National Gallery Society of Victoria in 1969. She was secretary of the Association of Australian Philanthropic Trusts from 1978 to 1980. The Meriel Wilmot Library was established in



August 1983 in the headquarters of the Australian Council on the Ageing in honour of her service to the needs of older people. It houses an extensive collection of reference material covering all aspects of ageing. Meriel Wilmot-Wright's husband was, following his distinguished career as a physiologist, university administrator and advocate for civil liberties, chancellor of the university from 1980 to 1989 and our photograph of them both (above) was taken during that time.

Many more stories of women's achievements in the Department of Physiology at Melbourne remain to be told. The women include, for example, Lili Jackson Maxwell, who went from research to a philanthropic and domestic career; Margaret Hutchinson and Patricia Keogh, who spent decades demonstrating and lecturing to thousands of doctors, dentists, physiotherapists, speech therapists, occupational therapists and science students; and the first woman professor, who was appointed in 2011. Many are remarkably absent from the archives and indeed the university's records. The forthcoming publication of a history commemorating a century and a half of physiology at Melbourne should go some way toward changing this.

Dr Juliet Flesch was a librarian for 30 years, working first at the National Library of Australia, then as foundation Principal Librarian (Collections) at the Baillieu Library. In 1998 she moved to the then Department of History as a research assistant and librarian. Her PhD thesis was published as *From Australia with love: A history of modern Australian popular romance novels* and she has published several other histories, including *Minding the shop*, a history of the Department of Property and Campus Services at the University of Melbourne.

- 1 Juliet Flesch, *Life's logic: 150 years of physiology at the University of Melbourne*, Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, forthcoming, 2012.
- 2 Peter Hobbins, 'Snake germs and Professor Halford's web', *UMA Bulletin*, no. 29, July 2011, pp. 3–6.
- 3 Rosie Agar, 'A university childhood', in *Melbourne University mosaic: People and places*, History Department, University of Melbourne, 1998, pp. 127–38; Audrey Cahn, *University children*, Melbourne: the author, 1988.
- 4 W.E.H. Stanner, 'Fison, Lorimer (1832–1907)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 4, Melbourne University Press, 1972.
- 5 Agar, 'A university childhood', p. 135.
- 6 Julie Tester, 'University's children welcomed back on campus', *UniNews*, 6 November 1998, p. 3.
- 7 Diane Langmore, 'Osborne, Ethel Elizabeth (1882–1968)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 11, Melbourne University Press, 1988.
- 8 Australian Women's Register, [www.womenaustralia.info/biogs/AWE4539b.htm](http://www.womenaustralia.info/biogs/AWE4539b.htm).
- 9 Leann Tilley, 'Audrey Cahn: A nonagenarian scientist remembers the early days', *Wisenet*, no. 49, [www.wisenet-australia.org/issue49/cahn.htm](http://www.wisenet-australia.org/issue49/cahn.htm).
- 10 Diana Dyason, in Hume Dow, *Memories of Melbourne University: Undergraduate life in the years since 1917*, Melbourne: Hutchinson of Australia, 1983, pp. 89–118.

- 11 Diana J. Dyason, *Glorious Smelbourne* (book and cassette, Unit 8 of 'Health, hygiene and history', a continuing education course offered by the History and Philosophy of Science Department, University of Melbourne), University of Melbourne, 1976.
- 12 R.W. Home, 'Eloge: Diana Joan Dyason', *Metascience*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1990, pp. 6–10.
- 13 R.J.W. Selleck, *The Shop: The University of Melbourne, 1850–1939*, Melbourne University Press, 2003, p. 619.
- 14 Michael Liffman, *A tradition of giving: Seventy-five years of Myer family philanthropy*, Melbourne University Press, 2004, pp. 78–83. See also his PhD thesis, 'Uncommon good: Seventy-five years of Myer family philanthropy', Department of History, University of Melbourne, 2002.