A Day at the Coast: Gender, Work and Holiday Making on the NSW Central Coast

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This article provides an introduction to an issue of the *Journal of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies* which brings together edited papers from the Sixth Newcastle Interdisciplinary Gender Studies Conference, held on 4 June 1999 at the Central Coast Campus of the University of Newcastle. It also places the conference in the wider context of the local, Central Coast tradition of holiday making. Since the late 1800s, residents of Sydney have traveled to the Central Coast to enjoy the seaside environment, often staying in family-run guest houses largely conducted by women owners and employees. As with the theme of the conference, gender can be seen to be central to the business of holiday making. The article argues that women were active instigators of Central Coast holidays and found ways to experience them: work as leisure. Like the conference goers of 1999, early twentieth century holiday makers enjoyed their change of scene and returned home reinvigorated.

CONFERENCE REPORT

Several of the papers in this number of the *Journal of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies* were presented at the Sixth Newcastle Interdisciplinary Gender Studies Conference held on the Central Coast Campus of the University of Newcastle on 4 June 1999. After half a decade of successful conferences on the Callaghan Campus, it was decided to invite the Faculty of the Central Coast to host the 1999 meeting. Staff and students of the Faculty took up this offer with enthusiasm and the result was a full and thought provoking day of current gender studies.¹

Oomera Edwards set the stage for the conference, offering a welcome to the Central Coast on behalf of its indigenous inhabitants, the Dharug people. Edwards explained that the locality of the campus, Ourimbah, was a place of learning for Aboriginal people. It was there that knowledge in the ways of their gender was imparted to adolescents. The exploration of current issues in gender undertaken at the conference continued a long tradition.

The opening address was given by Lyndall Ryan, Foundation Professor of Australian Studies in the Faculty of the Central Coast. Ryan provided an account of the shift from women’s studies to gender studies, a change which she argued had led to a depoliticising of the field. During the rest of the day, there were three sessions of concurrent presentations. Issues of masculinities were drawn out in several papers. These ranged
from perceptions of "Macaronies" in eighteenth century Britain to popular culture masculinity in contemporary film and magazines. Of particular interest were the masculinities played out after family breakdown, as explored by Sara Maddison at the conference and in this volume. Gender in the workplace was a second key theme with scholars investigating the measures put in place to bring about greater equity and generally finding them ineffective. Women's moral authority in organised religion, education, literature and lobby groups also drew attention. Several papers on topics related to gender issues in the fine arts were delivered, some relating to the therapeutic effects of art and craft. In these areas and others, current trends in gender studies were explored and debated. While no sessions were specifically devoted to postgraduate students, many participated and delivered some of the most stimulating papers.

As well as the formal program of papers, other approaches to gender were on offer at the Interdisciplinary Gender Studies Conference. 'Inclusions," an exhibition of artistic works on the theme of gender curated by Lynn Brunei, was opened by Professor Anne Graham of the University of Newcastle School of Fine Art during morning tea. Participants enjoyed the art works portraying male and female bodies and experience, especially those mounted outside the Gallery in the open air. An excerpt from a feminist interpretation of Waiting for Godot directed by Rebecca Conroy in which the characters included a career woman and a domestic drudge provided light relief during the luncheon break. Between the two afternoon sessions, the Masculinities number of the Journal of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies was launched. The enthusiasm of participants lasted through to the last papers of the day.

Overall, this was a very successful conference. It brought together academics and students engaged in gender studies from three states, providing them with a rich program of formal papers, artistic works and a dramatic presentation. For those of us based at the Central Coast, we also hope that it pioneered the role of the Faculty of the Central Coast as an intermediate meeting point for scholars from varying disciplinary backgrounds and physical locations.

RECENT CURRENTS IN GENDER STUDIES

Several papers at the conference took up pertinent themes in gender studies and have been published in this number of the Journal of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies. Sara Charlesworth's paper "Working Mums: The Construction of Women Workers in the Banking Industry" explores the tensions created by seeking gender equity through equalising measures as opposed to treating men and women exactly the same. She demonstrates that in the Australian banking industry, equalising measures such as maternity leave and award protection for women returning from that leave, although initially viewed as measures to prevent the loss of skilled and experienced staff, have led to a redefinition of women as members of the "mother's club" instead of equivalents of the "benchmark man." The very capacity to leave and re-enter the workplace shifts them from being regarded as reliable employees and co-workers to transients whose marginalisation into segregated positions and lower remuneration can be explained away
as the product of personal decision making. The attempt to bring about equality of opportunity has actually led to a less equal situation, further strained by the resentment fuelled by special treatment. Drawing upon case studies, Charlesworth argues this is occurring in a climate of new corporatism which is changing the nature of work, lacks the will to formulate better solutions and seeks only to meet legislative requirements.

"Private Men, Public Anger" is informed by oral interviews conducted by Sarah Maddison amongst members of the men's rights movement. It adopts an overtly feminist position in its analysis of how the collective identity of men's rights members has been constructed. She concludes that "men's rights" men rightly feel angry and disempowered in their personal situations but inappropriately blame this condition on the influence of feminism. They are caught within a personal desire to take on the new masculinity and a nurturing role for their children and a broader set of social structures, including the court system, still dominated by more traditional views of the male role. Her study develops a critical theoretical understanding of the processes of collective identity for "men's rights" men to facilitate dialogue between men and women in the contested areas of constructions of masculinity and fatherhood.

Hilary Winchester's analysis of the Lone Fathers Association continues this theme, deconstructing the discourses fathers employ to explain their sense of loss and abandonment when their families fall apart.

Gay macho as portrayed in the novels of Jean Genet is examined by Elizabeth Stephens in "Masculinity as Masquerade." Looking at the aggressive and muscular homosexuality portrayed in Genet's novels, Stephens considers whether this portrayal problematises or re-enacts familiar gender assumptions. Stephens' contribution to this debate concludes that Genet's portrayal of gay macho does not support the heterocentric logic that presumes homosexuality to be a secondary form of masculinity, but shows all masculinity to be equally performative and equally valid.

"Lady Cassidy's War" and "Class Struggle and the 'Community of Families'" explore the relationship between families and industrial disputes, showing the impact of private identities in the workplace. In "Lady Cassidy's War," Drew Cottle argues that the bourgeois voluntarism motivating the resolute Gwen Cassidy initially caused and then greatly prolonged a strike at the Duly and Hansford munitions plant in Sydney during World War II. Inspired by a desire to contribute to the war effort, her refusal to join a trade union which would support a strike while the country was at war ironically had the effect of disrupting wartime production when working class women refused to work alongside non-unionists. Cassidy's class identity came from her family background and position through marriage rather than the experience of temporary employment in a wartime factory and her legal and business connections permitted her to withstand the pressure to join the union or resign and to gain significant media coverage for her opinions. Tierney's account of the 1992 Associated Pulp and Paper Mills strike in Burnie, Tasmania examines the measures implemented to prevent excessive tension in the homes of strikers which might have resulted in domestic violence. Despite intimidatory behaviour by security guards employed to protect the plant, strikers eschewed violence. Tierney argues
that the union's inclusion of women in planning and picketing, the provision of childcare and other support services and the exclusion of alcohol all contributed to the peacefulness of the strike. The construction of the pickets as a "community of families," made strikers' partners feel part of the industrial action and relationships were subject to less strain than if the strike had been seen as completely separate from home life. In both of these disputes, family was a major influence on the attitudes and actions of workers.

While these papers range across a number of pertinent issues, one element which ties them together is their concern with the implications of inappropriate assumptions about the gender identities of both men and women. Men feel that they are denied their children because they are not nurturing women. Women are denied pay rises or promotions because they are not work-centred men. Genet's gay characters admire macho without denigrating homosexuality. Gwen Cassidy did not side with her "sisters" on the shop floor, but with the masculinist establishment. The men and women in the Burnie strike avoided what seems to be a necessary break between family and work interests by taking a broad view of the role partners could have in the strike. Individuals are poorly served by institutions which operate from fixed assumptions based on gender, but have the capacity to achieve their own ends by transgressing these assumptions.

In recent years, Gender Studies has continued to grow by engaging with issues beyond the political. Indeed, this was one of the points made by Lyndall Ryan in her opening address, though she saw the shift away from political engagement with issues affecting the status of women as something to be regretted. But the new researchers who have been a major feature of all the Newcastle Interdisciplinary Gender Studies conferences have been active in responding to new trends in the discipline. An awakening to the ways in which gender impacts on the construction of space has been one of the most exciting of the issues appearing on the expanding agenda of gender studies. It is therefore appropriate to make some consideration of the place in which the conference was presented, the Central Coast of New South Wales, a traditional holiday destination.

HOLIDAYMAKING ON THE CENTRAL COAST

The Central Coast of New South Wales grew rapidly in the early twentieth century as a place of proximate tourism, a weekend or holiday retreat for the workers of Sydney accessible by boat, train or road. The brief journey was a transition from the mundane world to one which seemed to be filled with beauty and peace, a coast "scalloped as neatly as a guest towel with beaches" (Curlewis 1929,25). For most women, urban or suburban lifestyles were recreated in this place of holiday.

The interest of historians in women away from home has been focused on the small elite who were able to travel. They were the exceptional women, those with the leisure, independence, financial resources and drive to enter the largely male world of spatial mobility (Hall and Kinnaird 1994, 194). The vast majority of women remained in the realm of the tourist. In The Image, A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America, Daniel J. Boorstin described the shift from travelling to tourism which took place from the middle of the nineteenth century in the West (Boorstin 1987,4). In contrast with travellers who
sought the unfamiliar, spurs for the imagination and the appearance of cultivation, Boorstin
defined the tourist as a pleasure seeker expecting interesting but not threatening things
to happen to him or her on cue. Tourism is the experience of a leisured individual who
voluntarily visits a place away from home for the purpose of experiencing a change
(Hall and Kinnaird 1994,11).

One difficulty in applying this definition of tourism to women is its reference to a
"leisured individual." Understandings of leisure developed before the 1970s equated it
with specific blocks of time set apart for non-work activities. Leisure was periods of
relaxation which were compensation for privations endured at work. Those who were
not in the paid workforce did not "earn" such leisure (Green, Hebron and Woodward
1990, 11). This formulation of leisure as the antithesis of paid work excluded many
women. Their recreation was different. In talking about their leisure, women identify
brief periods of time; a social dimension; a change in environment or activity; and any
activity beyond the basic drudgery of homemaking. Insights into women's leisure may
be drawn from Margaret Spring Rice's 1930 study of 1250 working class British women.
Rice found that gardening or sewing, which are in effect work, were experienced as
leisure because they were a change from cooking and cleaning (Green, Hebron and
Woodward 1990,50). Even visits to Infant Welfare Clinics brought the change of scene
and chance to converse with other mothers and health workers which made women
describe them as leisure activities. The women studied experienced vicarious pleasure
through their role as mothers when family members were enjoying themselves. Their
internalisation of the domestic ideology made them moderate their own desire for leisure
and find their pleasure in that of others. Further, the leisured individual often depends
upon work being done by someone else. Many forms of leisure for men, children and
younger women would not be possible without the labour of women in their middle
years. Holidays bring women's leisure and their contribution to the leisure of others into
sharp focus. Organising, catering, clothing, childcare and conciliation fall to women,
and are often in greater demand during holidays.

One site of such holidays was the guest houses which were established at identified
beauty spots scattered north and south of Sydney. For the Central Coast region, the key
to a vigorous tourist industry was the 1889 completion of the Hawkesbury River Railway
Bridge. The direct rail communication with Sydney made the Central Coast attractive in
terms of travel time, cost and convenience. As the author of a promotional booklet
persuasively argued:

Why go to Tasmania or New Zealand, and suffer all the horrors and inconvenience of
expensive sea journeys, when better scenery can be reached in a railway car from your
own door. (Visitors' Guide c.1920, 38)

Local entrepreneurs began to cater for these visitors with packages of transfers
from the Woy Woy, Gosford or Wyong railway station, accommodation, entertainment
and food. A single establishment could meet a family's preferences and means with a
cabin, a room in the main guesthouse or a tent on the shoreline. Children were welcome
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and were generally charged half price. This form of holiday making was that which offered family women the greatest freedom to participate as holiday makers. In guest houses, meals were catered, beds were made and rooms tidied by the hosts or their paid female employees. Photographs of guest houses often showed men and boys in active pursuits while women enjoyed unaccustomed leisure under the shade of the verandahs.

Avoca Beach was a popular destination. Surf seekers travelled to Woy Woy by train, by ferry to Kincumber Creek and finally by coach to Avoca. The principal guest house was Avoca House which could accommodate 150 guests. Its owner, Henry F. Halloran, was an active real estate developer who had bought land at Avoca Beach in 1908 and improved access to it by building a bridge across Avoca Lake. Other improvements included the planting of Norfolk Island pines along the foreshores to achieve the appearance which came to be expected by New South Wales holiday makers. The house itself was decorated with two gables and adorned with the word "WELCOME" in white letters which matched its front fence, benches and trimmings. It was supplied with electricity, a septic system and water. Many people returned each summer to particular guest houses and developed a sense of them as a second home. When, in response to a double drowning, local people decided to form a surf life saving club, guests of Avoca House were generous with monetary support for building a club house in return for associate membership (Poolel979, 27).

There were also guest houses further north in Wyong Shire, many of which were conducted by members of Richard and Gertrude Taylor’s large family who owned land at The Entrance (Strom 1982, 25). Beginning with Dunleith at North Entrance in 1895, these came to include Entrance House, Bayview, Pinheurst, Tuggerah House and Lakeside. In the 1920s, Irene Taylor Nicol ensured that Lakeside, on the shores of the Tuggerah Lakes, "specially caters for families" by providing the "comforts of a refined home." As well as electric lights and modern oak furnishings, Lakeside had fishing, boating and swimming without danger of sharks (Stinson 1984,37). In 1937, C.D.Bateman, having taken over from Albert Taylor, advertised the new Pinehurst as "Tuggerah's Premier Guest House." The house had hot and cold water in the bedrooms, electric light, a septic system, a music room, large verandahs and an excellent table. Those seeking an active holiday could try dancing, tennis, fishing, prawning, surfing, swimming, riding and billiards or visit The Entrance by bus (Stinson 1984, 134). At The Entrance, the latest and best pictures from city theatres could be viewed at the Winter Garden Theatre established in 1920 (Stinson 1984, 139). Guest houses offered various levels of accommodation at a range of prices, but all removed some of the home making burden from holiday making women. Their structures of family ownership and management provided women of the Central Coast with opportunities to apply their domestic skills in a profit-making venture.

As people arrived, more land was sub-divided on the Central Coast; simple holiday homes were built. While women shared some active pursuits such as fishing, boating and surf bathing, they were generally not relieved of their responsibilities for the child care, food provision and preparation and "house" keeping which facilitated the leisure of others. The relatively more primitive conditions in which they undertook these tasks
indeed must have made them more time consuming and onerous. As one writer in the 1930s noted, the "family leaves a comfortable, pleasant homestead with its many conveniences, and migrates to a weatherboard cottage with scant verandahs, and not nearly enough sleeping accommodation or kitchen utensils." Chilled foods and comfortable chairs were deserted for picnics with ants and flies. These arrangements were expensive, uncomfortable and temporary (Macken 1935, 39). With the rise in popularity of self-contained and self-catering accommodation, the work of cleaning and food preparation which had been carried out by paid staff at guest houses fell to female holiday makers.

Women found their own enjoyment and satisfaction on holiday. Not all of their time was taken up with work. Even when it was, there was a sense of fun, that a change was as good as a rest. Efforts were often shared between households, making usually solitary endeavours communal pastimes. Connections with others have been identified as an important element of leisure, especially those that strengthen family relationships. Many women would have felt selfish if they had left their families at home to participate in community activities (Parkes and Paddick 1990,11), but by resituating the family in a leisure space, women could enjoy themselves without guilt. The natural environment was an improvement on the hot and dirty city and time was always found for a stroll or a paddle. There was also the vicarious enjoyment of watching children run about, free, healthy and tanned in the fresh air and sunshine. The combination of a pleasurable change in residence and socially accepted benefits to other family members made Central Coast holidays attractive.

The Central Coast holiday experience has continued to evolve. In the 1950s, the caravan holiday rose in popularity. In some instances, such as Dunleith and Pinehurst, guesthouses were demolished to make way for caravan parks that retained the original names (Stinson 1984, vol. 4, 86 and vol. 5, 134). Others conjured up American associations in names such as Waikiki, Hollywood and Moana (NRMA1958 and 1959). Instead of having to move into a strange place, the family could re-form in their own familiar territory, albeit still on a reduced scale. The caravan was provided with as many of the customary conveniences as could be managed and decorated to the same taste as home. In the 1990s, with the rising demand, costs of holidaying on the Central Coast continue to climb. Many people, especially retirees and young couples, have permanently removed to one time holiday spots shifting the basis of the economy in general and the real estate market in particular. While modest beachside houses in Wagstaffe and Killcare sell for over $300 000, rents for holiday houses range from $ 1000 a week for waterfront houses to $350 a week for one bedroom bungalows (Sydney Morning Herald 28 December 1996,45). In response to this and the decline in caravanning, some caravan park owners have reconfigured their offerings, erecting villas in landscaped grounds. While it remains an economical place to live, the Central Coast is becoming less able to provide an accessible and inexpensive holiday.

Reflecting on the nature of tourism, Boorstin wrote, "We expect a faraway atmosphere if we go to a nearby place; and we expect everything to be relaxing, sanitary
and Americanized if we go to a faraway place” (Boorstin 1987,4). The early twentieth century Central Coast holiday experience did not fit neatly into either of his categories. For most holidaymakers, it was a nearby place with a nearby atmosphere. Their expectation seems to have been that it would provide a break from the urban environment without shifting the normal patterns of daily life to any significant extent. Women, in particular, continued many of their usual duties and responsibilities. This is closer to Boorstin’s observation that, when touring, "we look into a mirror instead of out a window, and we see only ourselves" (Boorstin 1987,119). Holiday makers essentially recreated the urban in different space, leaving out paid work and pollution but retaining women's labour, high levels of amenities and close proximity to neighbours. While representing change, the Central Coast did not offer a challenge. In making their holidays, families merely transplanted the domestic order known in the nearby city, into the sandy soil of the Coast.

The Central Coast was an appropriate location for the 6th Newcastle Interdisciplinary Gender Studies Conference. Like holidaymakers of an earlier age, conference participants journeyed away from home, enjoyed a change of scene and encountered old friends and congenial new acquaintances. There the similarity ends. In contrast with those who chose holidays on the Central Coast for their ease and predictability, conference goers posed new interpretations of gender issues and engaged with one another in active debate. As will be seen in the papers included in this volume, the result was a significant contribution to gender studies.

NOTES

1 As convenor, I would like to thank Gender Studies at Newcastle for offering us the opportunity to hold the conference; the Dean of the Faculty of the Central Coast Professor Les Eastcott for financial assistance; Professor Lyndall Ryan for practical and moral support; and the many members of the School of Humanities who provided the advice, time and skills which made the conference possible.

2 An earlier version of this section was published in Images of the Urban Conference Proceedings, Sunshine Coast University College and International Australian Studies Association, 17-19 July 1997, ed. Lynette Finch and Chris McConville (Maroochydore: Sunshine Coast University College, 1997).
WORKS CITED


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