

'Oh for a girls' college!'

Hilary Stace

Nelson College for Girls has realised the high hopes held by those who pressed for its foundation more than a century ago.

Jane Maria Atkinson, a resident in Nelson, wrote to a friend in Europe in August 1870 "Oh for a girls' college!" but more than a decade passed before Nelson College for Girls finally opened. It was not for lack of lobbying. The local papers and many prominent citizens, including the Principal of Nelson College, supported the cause. Finance was the problem.

Yet the founders of Nelson had early realised the value of education and in the 1850s had imposed a yearly rating for schools. Nelson College first opened in temporary premises in 1856 and there were several primary schools and a few private schools by the 1870s, including a private girls' school. Admitting girls to Nelson College was not seen as desirable, although some of the teachers apparently taught classes for girls after hours. The Education Act of 1877 provided for free primary education but public secondary schools still charged fees. Parents had to be convinced of the value of education for their daughters.

In 1878 the School Commissioners set up a special fund for a girls' college and five years later the school became a reality. The Governors of Nelson College reported to Parliament in 1883 that they had "in the course of the last year, found themselves in a position to carry out a purpose which they have for many years anxiously entertained, namely the extension of the benefit of higher education to girls". Nelson College was doing well and funds were finally available to start the girls' school. It would have the capacity for one hundred and fifty pupils and up to fifty boarders. A site was chosen between Trafalgar and Bronte Streets and the school opened on 2 February 1883 with eighty pupils. More than a century later the school still occupies the same site, though the handsome original wooden building, which appears in the photos illustrating this article, has gone.

The first principal was twenty-six-year-old Kate Milligan Edger, the first New Zealand woman university graduate. Lilian, her sister,

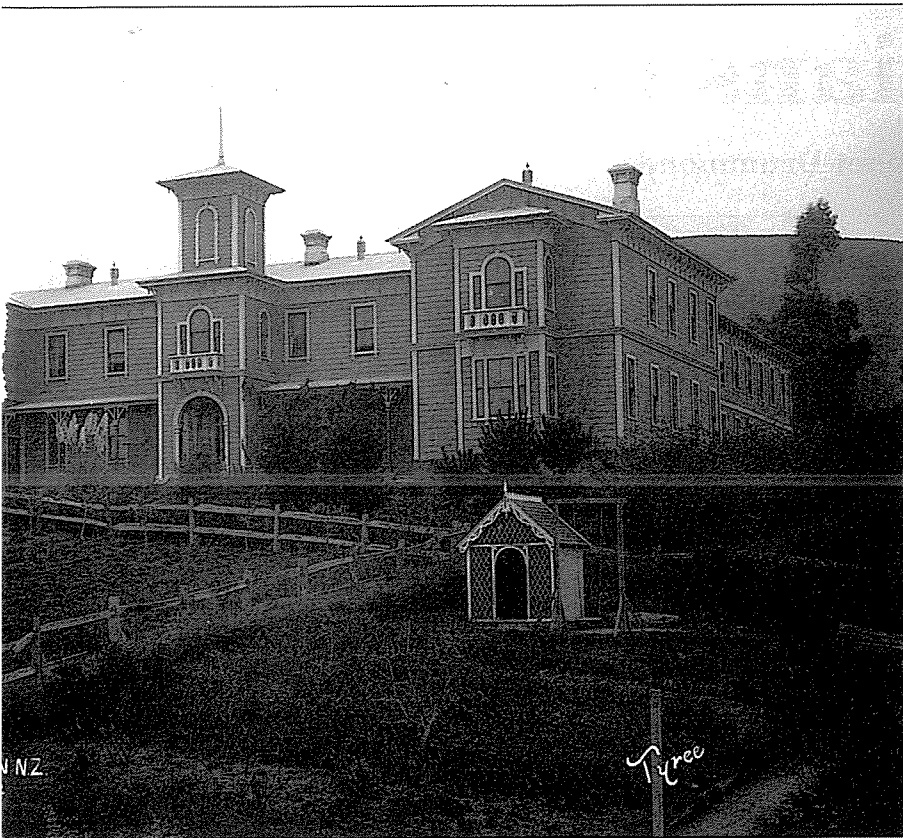
was the assistant. The curriculum included English grammar, composition and literature, physical science, Latin, mathematics, singing and geography, all of which Kate Edger taught. (French, German, drawing and drill were also offered.) In their report for 1884 the Governors reported that the roll was over one hundred (including twenty-six boarders) and that four pupils had passed the entrance examination for the University of New Zealand. At the prize-giving in 1884 Prof. John Macmillan Brown of Canterbury College (who had taught Kate and Lilian) expressed support for academic education for girls saying "there were many women whom it would be cruel to confine to the sphere of home, where they had no opportunity of bringing their intellect into play". Kate Edger remained Principal after her marriage to William Evans in 1890, but resigned a few months later. She had set the school up well.

Local Nelsonians were brought into the school to teach particular subjects over the years. Dorothy Kate Richmond, an accomplished artist and niece of Jane Maria Atkinson, was art mistress from 1883 to 1885. Her sister, Ann Elizabeth, taught German and French.

In 1899 Nelson College for Girls was one of the first schools to introduce hockey. Tennis and swimming were also popular. Corsets were discouraged by Miss Greenwood, who taught physical education from 1908 to 1912. One student who particularly benefited from the sports available was boarder Cora Wilding who excelled in tennis, hockey and swimming in her time at the school (1903-04). She later studied art and physiotherapy and in Christchurch in the 1930s founded the Sunlight League and campaigned for healthy living.

In 1904 the school was expanded, partially in response to a new law requiring a two-year free secondary school place for anyone passing the Proficiency Examination. In the College's entry in the *Cyclopedia of New Zealand* the grounds were described thus: "The college is surrounded





by about three acres of ground, a part of which is devoted to a large vegetable garden, well-kept flower gardens and a good asphalt tennis court. The playground is particularly pretty, and consists in part of grassy slopes thickly shaded with fine trees".

Principal from 1906 to 1926 was Margaret Lorimer, nicknamed the Mighty Atom because she was a powerful figure in spite of being only five feet (1.05 metres) high. She relaxed by going mountaineering in the holidays and in 1918 climbed Aoraki/Mount Cook.

Two influential journalists associated with the school were Constance Barnicoat (pupil, 1888-89) and Ethel Jacobson (teacher, 1901). Constance Barnicoat became an international press correspondent based in Europe and instituted the Barnicoat Essay prize to encourage the study of contemporary world history. Ethel Jacobson was called home from the school by her ill father to manage his newspaper, the *Akaroa Mail*, which she edited for more than fifty years.

Elsa Kidson, a pioneer soil scientist at the Cawthron Institute, won a Junior National Scholarship to Canterbury College in 1922 and went on to do important chemical research in horticulture. Christobel Robinson, who taught English and French from 1920 to 1924, became an advocate for vocational guidance for girls and persuaded Prime Minister Peter Fraser to set up a national vocational guidance system. The school's first Member of Parliament was Ethel McMillan, who, as Ethel Black, taught history in the 1920s.

Nelson College for Girls continues to thrive 114 years after its establishment. The buildings have changed and the numbers of pupils has increased but the high ideals of a secondary school for girls, espoused by women like Maria Atkinson and Kate Edger, remain. □

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People mentioned in this article feature in the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*. Jane Maria Atkinson can be found in volume 1 and Kate Milligan Edger and John Macmillan Brown in volume 2; Constance Barnicoat, Ethel Jacobson, Margaret Lorimer and Dorothy Kate Richmond are in volume 3. Elsa Kidson, Christobel Robinson and Cora Wilding will appear in volume 4 and Ethel McMillan is a likely candidate for volume 5.

Above, top: The imposing new building (now demolished) of Nelson Girls' College in the 1870s. Above: Girls on the College tennis courts in 1889 (Both photos: Alexander Turnbull Library)