

ROCKING P RANCH AND THE SECOND CATTLE FRONTIER IN WESTERN CANADA

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Principles of Need

As historian Mary Neth has illustrated, the American midwest was won in no small part through co-operation between genders and neighbours in agricultural communities during the earlier years of settlement when cash was scarce and some of the infrastructure of a more developed society as yet unavailable.¹ We can make the same observations with respect to the rancher/farmers in the Porcupine Hills of Alberta in the early twentieth century. By the time they split with Emerson, the Macleays themselves were constantly short of money, and though they had infrastructure such as barns, corrals, and many of the multitude of fences required for ranch operation in place, they and all their neighbours still lacked efficient transportation facilities. The roads, as we have seen, were so bad as to make it impossible to move services or labour quickly in or out of the area.

For that reason alone, cohesion and co-operation among district men, women, and families were required not only to handle a multitude of tasks for building, maintaining, and conducting their businesses and building their community but also for confronting emergencies of one form or another. One of the best indications of this is found in a report of a grass fire in the April 1925 issue of the *Gazette*.² A professional fire-fighting facility was another type of infrastructure Macleays and their neighbours lacked and, given the roads, they could hardly hope to bring one in as necessary from one of the bigger, not-too-distant towns like High River, and certainly not from Calgary.³ Rod Macleay himself was in Calgary when this fire was first reported, and Laura must have notified him by telephone, which by then was servicing most of rural Alberta as well as the towns and cities.⁴ Macleay had to take the C & E

train to Nanton, where Laura picked him up to get him to the “old shack which was as near as the car could take him” to the scene of the conflagration.⁵ Following is the report:

A short time after noon on Thursday, April 30th. A large cloud of smoke was seen in the South West.

Val Blake galloped post haste to the top of Muirhead hill to investigate. About four o'clock he came back ... with the news that the fire was burning from Thorpe and Cartwright's into the Half Way place.⁶

Cowboys and farmers were summoned from their work to the scene of action—they hurried on horseback and with teams into the hills, leaving Frank Sharpe fuming and fretting with a broken bone, in the bunkhouse.⁷ Very soon the whole country-side was aroused by Stewart Riddle on the phone and cars, tractors, ploughs, trucks, double-wagons, 4-horse teams and Fords came to swell the ranks of the fire-fighters....

All that night they fought the fire backed by a very strong west wind. When the morning of May 1st dawned, it had been conquered in most directions, but at one point was burning more furiously than ever and the fight was not won till the day was well spent. ...

Great work was done by the men who worked strenuously, some for 24 hours without a rest and also by the Fordson tractor owned by R. L. McMillan.⁸ It ploughed valiantly through the night, cutting up miles of fire-guard. ...

Clem Henson and Hugh Jenkins did good work with the coffee pot at the Thurber shack.⁹ The new Provincial Police-man from Nanton worked through the night and well into the day. Tex Smith fought so furiously that his feet swelled beyond the dimensions of his riding boots, which he had to dis-card and hang on his saddle.

Women and girls answered the call too. “We can't say how many loaves of bread and pounds of coffee were consumed but we are sure they were no more than the valiant fighters desired and deserved. Mrs Martin and

Miss Martin worked all night with Mrs Macleay (school ma'am hovering in the background) to feed the hungry."¹⁰

The fire was deadly and it caused a lot of damage, but without the action by virtually everyone, including members the local Indigenous nation, it could obviously have been a lot worse: "Thorpe and Cartwright lost all their winter feed and all their corrals and buildings, but were lucky enough to save their house around which Pete Comrie and one Indian fought until they had to ride for their lives."¹¹ Gardiner lost several stacks and his hay flat was burned out."¹² Though Macleay's "Half Way Place" was damaged, fortunately the best grass land and the cabin were saved.¹³ In giving expression to its pride in those who "willingly turned out to fight the" flames, the *Gazette* quite rightly noted that this was "everybody's fire."

This, then, was a case of people recognizing the basic requirements of self-preservation. An unrestrained blaze could sweep across the dry pastures and skip over the diminutive trail-like roads with a vengeance. In earlier days when the country had been far less densely populated than in the 1920s, fires had often been much less well attended and they had at times caused a lot more damage than this one. In 1901, for example, a fire had broken out near the town of Gleichen when a man named Dan McNelly carelessly threw a match into the grass after lighting his pipe. The flames quickly spread over some fifty square miles, destroying the precious grasslands and causing horrible depredations among the livestock. "Hundreds of cattle, horses and wild animals ... perished outright or were so badly marred they had to be killed or dragged themselves off to some secret spot to die lingeringly. Whole bands of horses and cattle were burned to death in the bottoms of the Little Bow [River] ... many being still alive when the range riders found them after the fire and mercifully shot them down in scores."¹⁴

By the 1920s the *rural* western plains were as densely settled as they would ever be. It was at that stage that people could come together in sufficient numbers to deal effectively with such a threat. Episodes such as this help us understand other characteristics about rural western society during the second frontier. These include politics. Frederick Jackson Turner argued that the frontier had a democratizing effect on American society because it stimulated reliance on individual action and initiative

among its participants as they strove to build new homes and farms out of the wilderness. This event suggests that a similar—though slightly modified—interpretation could be applied to ranching society in the western Canadian foothills. As people faced together the challenges associated with life in a remote region with very limited infrastructure, and as they co-operated to take on local emergencies as well as a host of other undertakings necessary to sustaining rural life, they learned reliance on their collective self, which in turn gave them a sense of the importance and potential of citizen action. How quickly the farmers, ranchers, and hired help organized in this instance and how readily they assumed responsibility for their own welfare suggests that by 1925 they had thoroughly embraced that concept. There is no reason to believe that the same could not be said for regions throughout the rural Canadian West wherever conditions similar to those in the Porcupine Hills prevailed. This event provides context from which to view the rise of farmers' co-operative movements in the early twentieth century, including the United Grain Growers, the Alberta Farmers' Co-operative Elevator Company, the Manitoba Grain Growers' Association, and the Saskatchewan Grain Growers' Association.¹⁵ It also helps one comprehend how a farmer and rancher's lobby group turned political party, the United Farmers of Alberta, could sweep into power in 1921 with a platform based on democratic and citizen enlisting principles, including "Proportional Representation of All Classes," "Direct Legislation and Recall," "Adequate Notice of Election," and "Abolition of Patronage," as well as "Encouragement of Co-operation."¹⁶

We would argue further that the same sorts of need encouraged rural rancher/farmers to overcome some traditional biases with respect to both gender and race. Albertans generally have at times been described as racists, and they have been accused of upholding a traditional, stereotypical and rather chauvinistic view of masculinity.¹⁷ Some of these depictions have come from the hard-nosed research of modern historians looking back on the frontier period.¹⁸ The argument here, however, is that the *Rocking P Gazette* stands as evidence that such portrayals could be grossly overstated in reference to ranching society in the foothills in the 1920s.

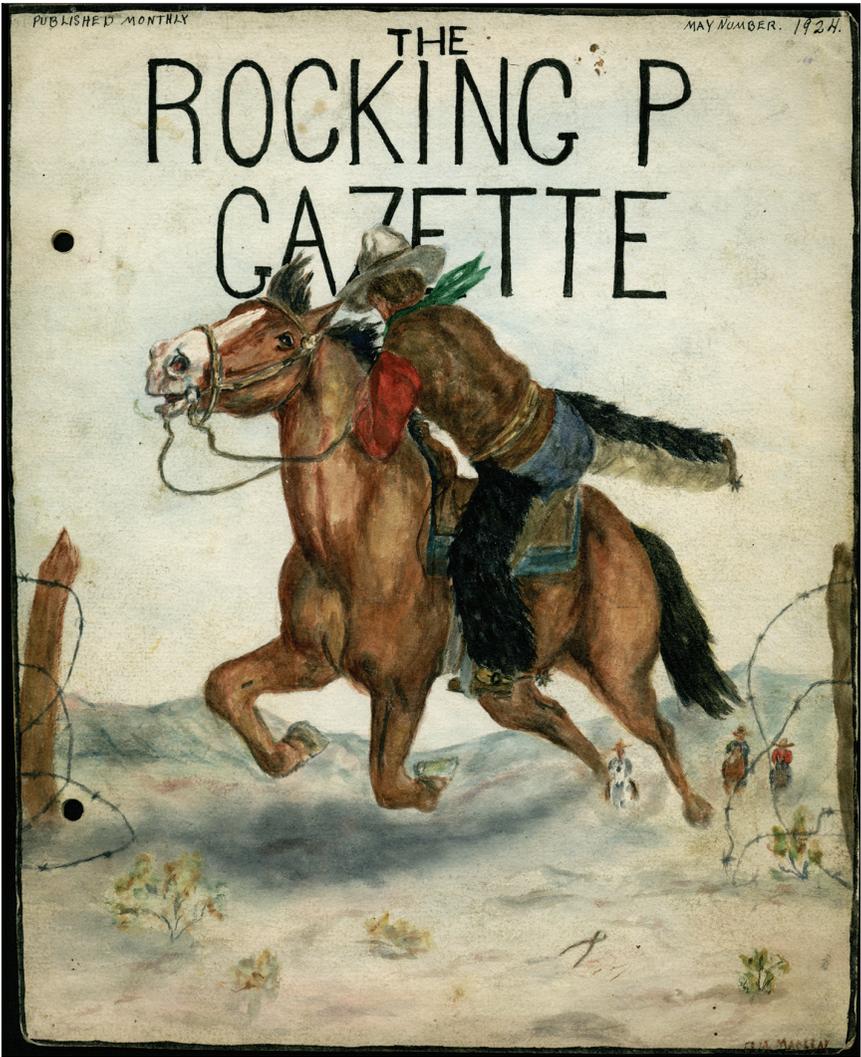


FIGURE 10.1. Neighbouring ranchers cooperated to take on this challenge too. Dorothy Macleay's depiction of a Cattle rustler. *Rocking P Gazette*, May 1925, cover. Property of the Blades and Chattaway families and their descendants.

Dealing first with the gender issue: there was in fact a tendency among both sexes to allot a relatively high stature for this time in history to women and girls that stemmed first from the blurring of gender roles. As we have seen, frontier exigencies forced men and women to work closely together in pursuing and defending their operations and, as Laura's example demonstrates, this could include business. This brought a reassessment of female capabilities, which can be detected in some of the short stories the two young editors featured in their newspaper. A good example is a piece Maxine wrote under the pseudonym "Carney Mulligan," entitled "Canyon Callum."¹⁹ In this story, rancher Mike Callum and an outlaw named Dead Shot Dan get into a gunfight over Mike's daughter, Canyon, whom Dead Shot covets. Dead Shot is faster on the draw and he gets off the first shot, mortally wounding Mike. The assertive Canyon does not hesitate to take revenge: "at almost the same second ... another shot rang out, 'Dead Shot' fell forward on his face dead" and "out ... stepped Canyon with a smoking colt in her hand." After her father dies from his wounds, Canyon, "now the boss of the ranch," immediately takes over and makes changes necessary to the future. She appoints "one of the boys, Starr Skinner, foreman, firing Shorty McMillan the old foreman, because he has fallen in love with her." From that point "everything went well for a year, then the boss and the foreman joined to run the [ranch] together." Even then Canyon is not content suddenly to become the doting wife dutifully limiting herself to domestic duties. While she gives up "shooting men" and "outlaws," she keeps "up her target practice and riding" and continues to be a major player—a force to be reckoned with—in the world outside the home.²⁰

Interestingly, this story could be seen as foreshadowing the young editors' own futures, as they were both to marry and bring in a husband to help them run their respective inherited portion of Macleay ranches. They were both also to be forceful in business as well as operational matters.²¹

As some of the poetry such as "The Little Twenty-two" and "The Feminine Cowboy" demonstrate, the high estimation of the abilities of women represented in the "Canyon Mulligan" story would not have been disputed by some in the *Gazette's* male audience. We would argue that that opinion was widespread on the ranching frontier as men recognized women's crucial contributions.²² The other factor that gave frontier

Canyon Cullum.

and Dan thought he was making a hit, when all of a sudden, he received a heavy right hand cut to the jaw, sending him to cool off in the trough full of water. Just as Dan ~~submerged~~, from the trough Mike Cullum rode up on a wild horse. Now Mike had told Dan, he would think about the offer, and in the meanwhile, he was to keep away from the ranch, and Canyon, alike.



Canyon. Cullum.

"What in earth you doing here?" Mike yelled.
 "That's my business," roared he wet and shaking Dan. They started to bellow at each other, and threaten everything they thought of at once to the other. Finally Dead Shot left, in a terrible state of mind.
 Two weeks later

FIGURE 10.2. Canyon portrayed as an accomplished outdoors woman ready to saddle her horse herself. The whip suggests she is not an overly gentle rider. Rocking P Gazette, September 1923, 32. Property of the Blades and Chattaway families and their descendants.

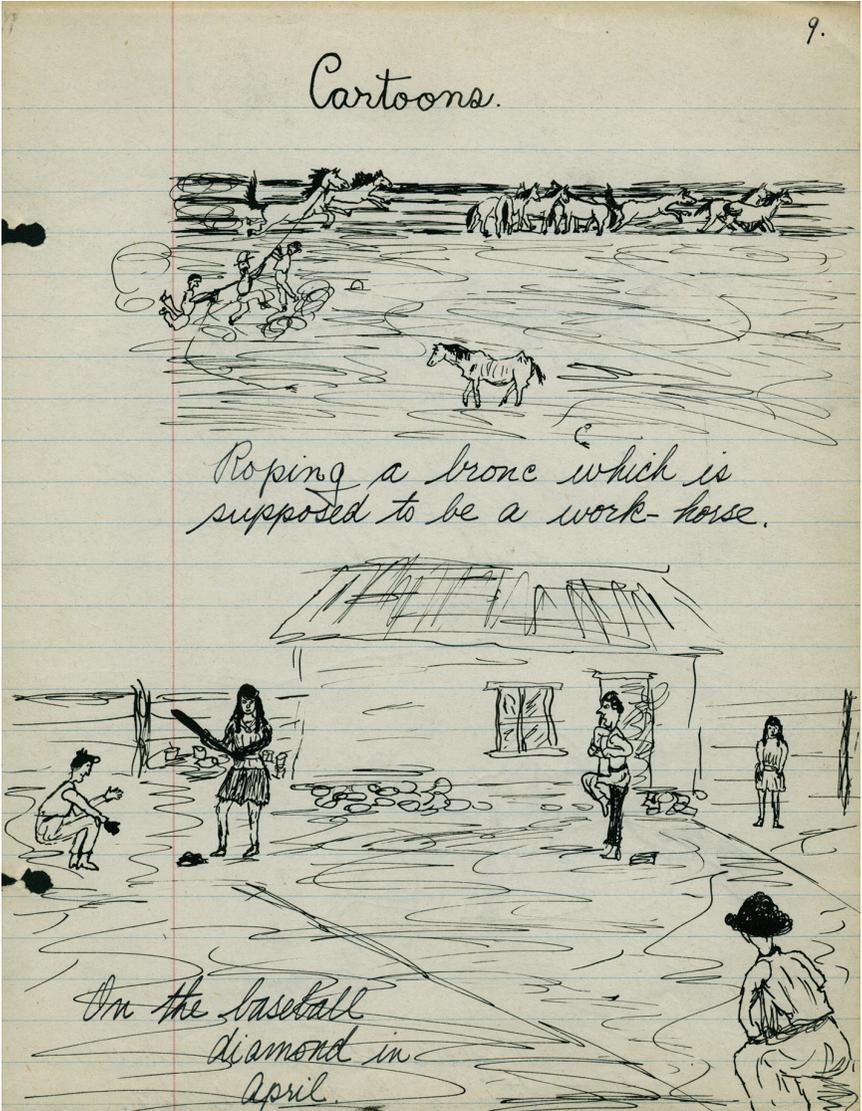


FIGURE 10.3. Gender roles were blurred in leisure activities too. *Rocking P Gazette*, April 1924, 9. Property of the Blades and Chattaway families and their descendants.

women a power of their own was simply their small numbers relative to males. The *Rocking P Gazette* represents a society in some ways still proudly tied to the past, and it also reflects the reality that in one important respect that society had not changed a great deal demographically. In the earliest days of settlement, around the turn of the twentieth century, males had outnumbered females by two or three to one depending on the geographic location.²³ For that reason young men had been constantly preoccupied with finding a mate. By the 1920s the gender gap in Alberta had narrowed, but it had not by any stretch disappeared. In 1921, there were 324,208 males and 264,246 females in the province. The disparity was about 22 percent. However, in the ages where both genders might be expected to be most interested in matrimony—between 25 and 54 years—there were 142,741 males and only 98,568 females.²⁴ The disparity was almost 45 percent. Moreover, in the countryside, where the wage-earning component on the bigger farms and ranches was overwhelmingly male, it had to be considerably larger than in other more populous areas.

In this social environment, young frontier men met few women, single or married, in the course of life, and for that reason alone they had been liable to feel uncomfortable and somewhat inadequate in their presence. “I can’t remember that I ever spoke to but three good women in all the time after I left my family,” a Montana cowboy reminisced, “and they were all older women, or at least they were married ... I’d been ... living with men. We didn’t consider we were fit to associate with [a good woman] ... the cowpunchers was afraid [of them]. “We were so damned scared for fear that we would do or say something wrong—mention a leg or something like that would send them up in the air.”²⁵ One cowpuncher related an incident involving a school teacher who “was a great favorite with everybody.” One evening when he was at a dance the floor manager announced a “Ladies’ Choice.” He “heard that call and figured [he] was out for that dance—and took a big chew of tobacco.” “To my surprise,” he said, “this little lady stepped up to me and asked me for that dance. Now I had no chance to get rid of that chew and rather than let the little queen know I chewed tobacco or lose that dance, I swallowed the whole works, tobacco juice and all.” Later, the same guy commented on the “high regard and respect we had for those good women of that day, as we saw so

few of them.” He told about an “old hard-faced cowpuncher that had a grouch about something,” and would be spouting off about it. “When one of those women would give him some little attention, his face would soften up until you couldn’t tell it from the face of the Virgin Mary.”²⁶

Dorothy and Maxine understood how relatively rare, cherished, and sought after “good women” still were among the predominantly single males on the Macleay holdings, and in issue after issue of their newspaper they gave vent to what they saw as their perpetual quest. “Special notice will be called to the cowpunchers, who since the new ‘school marm’ has arrived [for the Muirhead school], are looking fine in new chaps, spurs, shirts, etc. and in some cases even new overalls,” they jokingly commented in their September 1923 issue.²⁷ Months later Robert Raynor reported for the *Gazette*:

The annual meeting of the Muirhead School D[istrict] # 2032 was held in the Muirhead school at 2 O’Clock P.M. on January 12th. Ratepayers present were; P. Comrie, T. W. McKinnon, A. Leman, Chas Dew, H. Jenkins and R. Raynor. A. Leman was re-elected trustee.²⁸ It is amusing! You can hardly get a connected sentence out of those dry-hide bachelors when it comes to educating the children of the district, but it is surprising, it is marvelous, how they emerge from their semi-coma state when the subject changes to whether we have to engage a man or a lady teacher. The tidal wave was running heavy in favor of a lady teacher.²⁹

The girls realized that their ranch hands envisaged forming a relationship with any female of the right age who happened to appear in the countryside. They may have known, too, that few suitable ladies ever settled very long in any of the districts without being bombarded with proposals for marriage.³⁰ Frederick Ings thought this worthy of mention when he composed his memoirs in the 1930s. “In frontier countries, girls are scarce, and so it was here. Hardly had a visiting sister, niece or friend arrived, than she was besieged by suitors. Practically, every girl or young woman who came in married at once. In fact, it was looked upon as a for[e]gone conclusion.”³¹ Ethel Watts, herself, was engaged to Tom McKinnon, one

of the Macleays favourite ranch hands, just in time for it to be mentioned in the later editions of the *Gazette*.³²

It also reflects their understanding of their audience that on average the girls wrote at least one short story for each issue about one or more cowboys searching or competing for a country damsel. All the stories offer refreshingly unencumbered plots. “The Easter Lily” by “Coyote Cal” in March 1925 relates how Pete the cowboy, after inflicting a beating on another potential suitor from the city, finds the power to express his love to the young lady named Lily through a flower of the same name at Eastertime.³³ “Mixed Up,” in September 1923, is about a detective named Slim who, after falling in love with a cowhand named Curly while the latter is disguised as a woman, in the end finds true love with Curly’s sister Shannon.³⁴ In “The Dying Cowboy,” by “Antelope Al,” a ranch hand bonds with a young lady after being fatally hurt in a fall from a wild bronco. “Ann leaned over and met the lips of the dying cowboy. His brown eyes smiled up into hers for an instant, his grey lips twisted and he passed over the great divide.”³⁵

It also reflects demographic conditions that near the end of each monthly issue of the *Gazette* Dorothy and Maxine included a personal column designated “matrimonial bureau.” Beyond doubt, it was meant as a spoof, but it would be difficult to make the argument that it was socially irrelevant.

These entries come from the December 1923 issue.³⁶

Handsome young lady wishes to correspond with attractive Cow-puncher with view to matrimony. Good flap-jack thrower and whistler. Red-headed man preferred.—Miss. B., Muirhead, Alberta.

Young lady wishes to correspond with cow-boy who can cook and keep house, lady musical and fond of travel. Photos exchanged. Ilene K. Box 3. Edmonton, Alberta.

Handsome young Cowpuncher wishes to correspond with dark-haired young lady, one who can teach school preferred. Apply, High (Box H.) River. Alberta.

Who Will Take Me; -- ?

Crippled cowpuncher wishes old but nimble wife. Must be good cook and house-keeper as puncher has one leg off at knee, and a hook hand. Apply soon as possible to Robbers' Roost, Alberta.

Wanted—

Wealthy young wife, looks don't count. Man very homely but stylish dresser. J.D.B. Okotoks, A.

Wanted –

Wife. Must be good cook, able to fry steak and boil water. Not over thirty. Apply to C.H., High River.

Cowpuncher wants wife to run outfit for him. Has good house and a large set of unbreakable dishes. Box 322, Muirhead, Alta.

As the family ranches or ranch/farms rose out of the ashes of the cattle corporations and established the second cattle frontier during the first two or three decades of the twentieth century, their participants learned that collaboration was a necessary strategy for economic survival. This encouraged (or forced) them to understand that they were more resilient when working closely together in face of emergencies such as forest fires, just as they were when tackling routines such as putting up hay or nurturing and protecting their stock. Necessity, along with a numerical shortage of females, also influenced them in some ways to hold women, relatively speaking, in high respect while overlooking some traditional ideals.

This could and did at times have redeeming and gender-levelling effects. To quote an expert on the lives of western women during this period on the American frontier: “within the new and often unfamiliar sphere of activities imposed by frontier conditions, women compromised few of their Eastern-dictated goals, but they did find new outlets of expression and new fields for personal development and satisfaction.”³⁷ Laura Macleay's case also provides support for this statement as well as Mary Kinnear's argument, noted above, that women in rural western

Why Stay Single any Longer?
When just a few lines will bring me to
your feet!
Girls, I am a go-getter, - have money
in the Bank and can work 24 hours a
day, and expect wife to do the same.
Write by return mail, - would like to
get married in time for wife to put in the
Spring crop.

n. g. - Cayley, Alta.



'I am a go-getter!' n. g.

FIGURE 10.4. Humorous because it's not totally fictitious. "Matrimonial Bureau," *Rocking P Gazette*, March 1925, 72. Property of the Blades and Chattaway families and their descendants.

Canada during the interwar period gained a sense of their own stature on the land through their essential contributions to the rural economy.³⁸

Again, this does not suggest that women on western ranches and farms achieved equality. The world was not ready for that. Even the men in the United Farmers of Alberta party, who did so much to promote women's rights including the vote in provincial and national elections and dower privileges, did not foresee the path to parity.³⁹ It does appear, however, that many rural women felt they were genuinely working in partnership with their husbands, which must, in turn, have brought some (perhaps many) of them a certain amount of confidence as well as self-esteem. This might also, then, help to explain why an almost endless list of western women the likes of Emily Murphy, Henrietta Edwards, Nellie McClung, Irene Parlby, Louise McKinney, Violet McNaughton, Ida McNeal, Mary McCallum, Georgina Binnie-Clark, and Hannah Gale were inspired to achieve so much politically, socially, or academically in the course of one lifetime.⁴⁰ It could, moreover, suggest a reason why women were able to win the franchise in the three prairie provinces before they attained it at the national level, despite the fact that the total population base (and especially the total female population base) of the three provinces was far smaller than that of Ontario alone.⁴¹ Arguably, it was by living in frontier society and viewing what so many so-called ordinary women achieved in establishing and then sustaining the ranching and farming frontiers that these women were emboldened to believe in, and to act upon, their own vast potential. The fact that two very young ladies like Dorothy and Maxine Macleay had the temerity, albeit with their female teacher's help, to produce the seventeen monthly editions of the *Rocking P Gazette*, with all its art, current events, scholarship, wit, and humour, seems to bolster this interpretation.⁴²