

January 07, 2018

HISTORY HER STORY

Tales Of Love, Longing And Fierce Feminism...
Researcher Sneha Krishnan Has Created A
Collage Of Life In Women's Colleges In The City
Over The Century



“COLLEGE GIRLS IN THE
1930S TO 50S WERE
AMBITIOUS, SOCIALLY
COMMITTED AND TRAVELLED
TO CONFERENCES ABROAD

Sneha Krishnan | RESEARCHER, ST JOHN'S COLLEGE, UK

LOOKING BACK: (Clockwise) WCC's iconic Doveton House; WCC's first professors with principal Eleanor McDougall in the centre; sports day and hostel life in Stella Maris College

Of men & morality

After she took over as principal of WCC, Eleanor McDougall began writing about her experience. For instance, she believed that coming to college, particularly to live in an urban hostel, exposed the Indian college student to potential “threats and unsafety from the men around her”. When she found out that one of her students, Kamala, eloped with and married a young man named Govind whom her family did not approve of, McDougall writes that Kamala went with Govind not because she might have loved him but rather because “the word of command was too much for her; she had no more power of resistance to the voice of Govind than a filed scrap of iron to the pull of the magnet”. For women quite so morally infirm, McDougall argues, even the telephone is a “dangerous instrument, likely to allow men of bad reputation to get in touch with them for immoral reasons”.

Kamini.Mathai@timesgroup.com

Lily O Lily, Help us not to be so silly,
As to Fall in love with the Dhobi,
For we have come here to Study,
at WCC.

The silly Lily ditty is the stuff of legend at the 102-year-old Women's Christian College (WCC). The story of the fateful love affair, which ends in Lily killing herself and haunting the campus, is faithfully passed on from seniors to every generation of freshers.

But the Lily song, according to Sneha Krishnan — junior research fellow in human geography at St John's College, Oxford — may have a li'l grain of truth to it. “The rather scandalous ‘Principal's Journals’ of Eleanor McDougall, WCC's first principal, mentions a girl who eloped with a man ‘inappropriate’ for her. It didn't end the same tragic way as Lily, but is a suggestion of the kind of crisis that such instances generated,” says Krishnan, who is researching the collective experience of women in colleges and hostels of Chennai for her upcoming book, *A Future in Past Tense: Girlhood and the Ethics of Time in South India*.

While doing her BA in history at Stella Maris College, Chennai, Krishnan, came across college magazines from the 1940s. “I was curious to know the everyday details of college life then. What did girls read? What films did they watch? What did they hope to be in the future?” says Krishnan.

Though the magazines were, in many ways, an imperfect source as their content was controlled by faculty editors, a lot of interesting material got in — hostel pranks, relationships between senior and junior students, and college chapel weddings. Soma Samarasingha, the first Sinhalese student from WCC, who passed out in 1918, was given away in marriage by her principal.

Krishnan's research also led her to understand the lives of the principals, whom she terms “fascinating, complex, and accomplished”. McDougall, for instance, kept a journal in which she wrote, in 1913, that the best way to educate young women in India was in a residential college, away from the influence of the traditional home, a view that led her to establish WCC two years later.

The magazine of another century-old women's institution in the city, Queen Mary's College, speaks of founder Dorothy de la Hey organising a jutka (rickshaw) to get her students to Presidency College, so they'd have access to a lab. After retirement, when she returned to the UK, de la Hey established a generous pension for her driver in Madras from her own personal funds. “There is a wonderful set of letters in which she negotiates with the Church of South India — the middleman through whom she distributed the funds monthly — to ensure her driver was being paid an amount appropriate to the rising cost of living in Madras. It's easy to ignore

the stories of service staff, who were as much resident in the colleges as the young women themselves, and this, to me was a real window into their lives,” says 30-year-old Krishnan.

In the early years, students at these institutions came mostly from elite families, says Krishnan, a trend that changed in the 70s. “Going by the magazines, college girls in the 1930s, 40s and 50s were often quite ambitious, and socially committed,” she says, adding that the college magazine reports a WCC survey of its alumna in the 60s that found over 60% employed in social service.

“Many young women took their privilege in being sent to college very seriously. So, they did a lot of work with the Student Christian Movement,” says Krishnan.

Her research points to records of WCC girls travelling to Burma, Ceylon and the US for Christian conferences, intent on finding “ethical solutions to world problems”, and debating about race and caste in the church. The registers of St Anne's College, Oxford, lists the names of more than 20 Indian students, who came through church-funded scholarships to Oxford, a few of them marrying British men, in some cases resulting in the men moving back with them to India.

“To me, this entire project has been a discovery of how life in the hostel opened young women up to a reconfiguration of kin and family, as well as to journeys both spatial and ethical,” says Krishnan.

**CAMPUS
DIARIES**