

Occasional Address delivered at a graduation ceremony on March 27, 2006
Emeritus Professor Alison Mackinnon

The Road to *Ithaka*

To begin with I would like to acknowledge with respect the traditional owners of this land – the Kaurana people.

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Professor Rowan, members of Council and academic colleagues, families and friends, and most importantly of all, graduands. I am deeply honoured by the award of this title and I warmly thank members of University Council for that distinction. I am also delighted to have the opportunity to speak to you all today.

May I first warmly congratulate all those graduating and their families and loved ones. What an exciting day this is for you. It is your day, a very special one – the culmination of one long journey, the beginning of another. All those long nights writing essays, finishing projects and works of art (for some of you, a thesis), all those times you wondered if you would ever head out into the world of work – or perhaps for some of you, ever be free of the difficult juggling of paid work and study. Some may well be thinking that now you will only have to manage two parts of your lives – family and work, rather than family, work and study. What complex lives many of you live now! And a special congratulation to the families, loved ones and friends who have supported, nurtured and encouraged you along the way.

Some of you know exactly where you want to go with your newly-minted degree: others are not too sure. One thing is certain: given the pace of social change many of you will end up with *unanticipated careers in quite unanticipated places*. The path ahead is largely unknown. The Greek poet, Constantin Cavafy, who wrote at the turn of the twentieth century, has

something to say about that path through life – the road to *Ithaka*, as he titled it¹.

*As you set out for Ithaka
hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery*

Cavafy emphasises the journey rather than the destination. And that is the theme of my address today. You may not know your destination in life, although you may have your own Ithika in mind, but you can enjoy the journey.

I come from a generation of women educated in the 1950s and 60s who did not expect to have careers. And some of us ended up in very different places indeed from anything we anticipated. My journey has certainly been interesting: although the destination was unclear. I certainly never imagined that I would be an Emeritus Professor, indeed that I would be a professor at all. If we did well at high school in my youth we might expect to go to Teacher's College. For those few women who considered university degrees (about 3% of the age group), winning a Commonwealth Scholarship or an Education Department studentship was absolutely essential. The late 1950s and early 1960s were times of great expansion in secondary schools and teachers were sorely needed. One way of ensuring a good supply was to offer studentships which paid both students' fees and a good living allowance. In return after graduation we were bonded to teach for three years, or, for women, one year if we married. I decided to take one of these Education studentships as I was a country girl, the eldest of eight children of a country parson, so money was scarce. Those studentships helped many young

¹ *Ithaka* by C.P.Cavafy (1863-1933) published 1911. Translated by Edmund Keeley & Philip Sherrard

country people to get to university. Shamefully, there were no indigenous women students in that period – for many indigenous students graduating today you are the pioneers for your families and communities and can hold your heads high with pride.

As I graduated with my Bachelor of Arts degree and a Diploma of Education I imagined life ahead as a teacher in secondary schools, at least for a while. This had not been the height of my teenage ambition – I had dreamed of becoming the secretary of a famous writer and travelling the world. I even had the writer picked out: it was to be Laurens van der Post, friend of Carl Jung and author of *The Bushmen of the Kalahari*. It never occurred to me that I might write books myself, or that I might travel the world in my own right.

The other certainty for most women and men of my cohort was early marriage followed fairly rapidly by the birth of several children. Women of my generation expected that knight in shining armour to come along and look after us and then we would become that icon of the time: the good station wagon wife with Omo-bright clothes hanging on the line.

Well as LP Hartley famously said, the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there. Between my student days and yours there has been a major revolution in gender relations and in generational relations – one of the most radical changes of modern times.

My particular field of study concerns women, their educational history and changing gender relations so my remarks may speak particularly to the women graduating – and that is perhaps appropriate as the majority of graduands today are women. I am fascinated by the history of women and their lives. Life has been radically changed for women by the contraceptive Pill, the movement for women's liberation, the vast march of women, particularly married women, into the workforce, the

expansion of popular culture, and radical changes in sexual behaviour. The broader context of economic and technological change has speeded up those processes at a dizzying rate. In some ways my generation has ridden the waves since the 1970s of economic growth, of the women's movement and of the vast increase in the workforce. We have also been part of making those things happen: if I cannot take any particular credit for shaping economic change I can, with many of my generation, take pride in some of the gains we achieved together for women. Now you can dream about being that writer yourself – not their secretary. English writer Hilary Mantel wrote recently in her memoir 'Some people have forgotten, or never known, why we needed the feminist movement so badly'. 'It was assumed', she writes, 'that marriage was the beginning of a woman's affective life, and the end of her mental life. It was assumed that she neither could nor would exercise choice over whether to breed; poor silly creature, no sooner would her degree certificate be in her hands before she'd cast all that book learning to the winds and start swelling and simpering and knitting bootees'. Hilary Mantel, studying law with a particularly obnoxious tutor in England in the 1960s, claims feminism was essential to prevent 'some talentless prat in a nylon shirt patronizing you, while around you the spotty boys smirked and giggled'².

Well we put paid to that and fought to have women's education taken more seriously, to encourage women to go on to higher degrees, to have more women as lecturers, to open up pathways to careers. I am proud to have been part of that movement, part of a coming together of millions of ordinary women around the world, ordinary people, who brought about significant changes. These changes have not only shaped my professional life, drawing me back into the workforce and into further study like so many of my generation, but they have shaped yours,

² Hilary Mantel, 2003 *Giving up the Ghost: a memoir*, London, Harper Perennial. Pp. 160-161.

giving you more options and they have provided the raw material for my research as an historian of women and of gender relations. We did not predict those waves on which we rode – as you now cannot predict what lies ahead.

My research underlined the vast difference education has made in transforming women's and men's lives over the last four decades. One conclusion is obvious – the more education women have the more independent they become. They marry later, if they marry at all, they have fewer children and are more likely to be in the workforce. It makes sense really, doesn't it: if you are still studying until your thirties it is hard to fit in partners and children. And most of you will be in the workforce for longer.

Treasury's Intergenerational Report, released in 2002, predicted that 81 per cent of women aged 50 to 54 would be in the workforce by 2041, virtually the same proportion as men of the same age. In 2005 only 70 per cent of women in their early 50s were working. So your journeys, particularly those of the women who are graduating today will be very different from mine and my contemporaries. Maybe your journeys will be longer, with more detours? Cavafy says:

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.

Arriving there is what you're destined for.

But don't hurry the journey at all.

Hope your road is a long one.

May there be many summer mornings when,

with what pleasure, what joy,

you enter harbors you're seeing for the first time;

One of my harbours involved several years at home as a full time mother with my three children, which I combined with part-time study, a period which I valued but is less and less attainable for young professional women today. This is a task for your generation – to ensure that the changes and policies we began to put in place are now developed further so that both men and women can enjoy both *Love and Freedom*, family life and work life and not be forced to choose between them. Many so called generation Xers are voting with their feet and refusing the family-unfriendly long hours' culture, the greedy institutions and the pursuit of worldly success, choosing instead more balanced lives. New work patterns emphasize flexibility, the ability to be mobile, an incompatible way to live with others. No doubt the artists amongst the graduating students today know all too well about the insecurities of short term contracts and commissions. Your harbours may well be your studio where you can immerse yourselves on your journeys.

Another of my favourite harbours involves libraries and archives. Let me confess: I like nothing better than to work in an archive reading letters and diaries about women's lives. These are the raw material for my books. Recently I spent some weeks in the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America. There I read the original questionnaires that Betty Friedan had used in 1957 for the famous study that formed the basis of her book *The Feminine Mystique*. The questions that she asked her fellow students from elite women's Smith College were very revealing – they really conjure up the nineteen fifties for women very well. Here are some of them: 'do you put the milk bottle on the table'; 'what do you wear mostly at home?; do you change for dinner?; 'have you had psychotherapy?; are you better looking than when you were at college – or faded? what difficulties have you had in working out your role as a woman?; do you hate getting older?'

Just thinking about those questions reminds us how much the world has changed. Norwegian researcher Harriet Neilson studied three generations of women – grandmothers, mothers and daughters (the daughters were finishing high school). She examined their lives with particular attention to three main steps towards adult life: starting to work, moving out from the parental home and sexual involvement. Each of the three generations she examined undertook those steps in a different order. The grandmothers mainly began work, moved out of home and then became sexually involved (usually involving marriage). For the mothers' generation the order changed to moving out, sex, then work. For the younger generation, the daughters, the order appears to have become sex, moving out, then work – although some parents here might be asking themselves whether moving out ever takes place. What will come next, I wonder?

Does this mean that adulthood is being reinvented? Many writers have noted the contradictions between various markers of adulthood in contemporary life where economic dependency is often prolonged yet sexual activity begins at an ever earlier age. Well at least a degree is a solid marker that a particular stage has been reached – it is an admission into a fellowship of high achievers, something to acknowledge with great pride.

Young people now are seen by sociologists to be writing their individual biographies: to construct portfolios of work and skills to sell to the highest bidder. The artists and designers amongst you have always understood that- the need for the excellence of your work to allow you to stand out amongst the crowd and compete on your own terms. For you there are few guarantees of secure career patterns. But the fields of art, architecture and design at the University of South Australia are held

in high esteem. You have taken a strong step in building that portfolio with your new degree.

The harbours you will sail into will be very different from mine. Some certainties remain, however: there will be times when you will have to row against the tide. There are strong currents drawing us back to the period I thought we'd left behind. There are echoes between the Cold War of the 1950s and the current highly manipulated fear of terrorism which has permitted some of our civil liberties to be eroded. Those who argue for peace now are often accused of lacking patriotism just as peace makers of the 1950s were accused of being communists. Popular and consumer culture seeks to paint feminism as an out of date wowseryism, which it never was, and depicts the sexual revolution as rendering all women appear as sexually available, concerned only with the latest fashion items. Individualism is rife. For those of you becoming social workers and working with disadvantaged families, for those of you working with indigenous communities, the idea that every individual can construct their own career biographies and buy their own Prada handbag will seem all too hollow.

But as an historian I also know that life is not linear, it is cyclic – as the 1950s and early 60s were followed by the progressive social movements of the 1970s – the civil and aboriginal rights movements, the women's liberation movement, the green movement - where people came together and asserted their common concerns – so our conservative and individualistic years will surely be followed by new movements, as yet ill defined. And you will be there – in the forefront shaping the next social changes.

There is much for your generation to build on, to take forward in ways undreamed of now. There is much pleasure to be gained in contributing

to social change with like minded people. I look forward to watching you do it.

Let me conclude with Cavafy again - speaking of the journey to his mythical island destination .

*Better if it lasts for years,
so you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.*

*Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you wouldn't have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.*

Your degree has given you the first step in your journey to Ithaka, to your dreams, and the wonderful knowledge that you have a qualification which no-one can take away from you, proof that you are capable of transforming your life and that of others. May you learn much along the way: may your harbours be mainly tranquil, and sometimes disturbing.

May you enjoy the journey, may you have the courage to follow your heart and, particularly, enjoy today.

Thank you.

