

UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

# Remembering Helen Macmillan Brown

*'This dissertation is submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of BA Honours in History at the University of Canterbury. This dissertation is the result of my own work. Material from the published or unpublished work of other historians used in the dissertation is credited to the author in the footnote references. The dissertation is approximately 9,948 words in length.'*

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## Abstract

This research paper examines the life and memory of Helen Macmillan Brown (née Connon). Helen was the first woman in the British Empire to earn a master's degree in 1881 as an early graduate of Canterbury College. She was also principal of Christchurch Girls' High School for over a decade. Helen's sudden death in 1903 prompted an outpouring of memorialisation from a wide variety of sources, including newspaper obituaries, physical sites such as Helen Connon Hall, busts and plaques, published family memoirs, and biographies. The key works on Helen's life are Edith Searle-Grossmann's feminist biography *Life of Helen Macmillan Brown*, published in 1905, followed by *Easily the Best: The Life of Helen Connon 1857-1903* by historian Margaret Lovell-Smith. Different public, personal, and biographic modes of remembrance – explored in the first three chapters – illuminate the most significant aspect of the popular narrative of Helen's life: her pioneering roles in women's education. The final chapter uses Helen's photography in an attempt to locate the real Helen beneath all of this memory. Her photography has largely been ignored in scholarship despite being one of the very few extant sources of her own voice. This analysis shows how different modes of public and private remembrance interact to emphasise Helen's contribution to women's education, while obscuring Helen's personal life and role as mother and wife.

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## List of Abbreviations

Christchurch Girls' High School (CGHS)

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## Introduction

Helen Macmillan Brown is one of New Zealand's most significant nineteenth-century women. She was the first woman in the British Empire to graduate with a master's degree, earning honours in English and Latin.<sup>1</sup> However, this is just one important example in a lifetime of achievements. Born Helen Connon, daughter of George and Helen Connon, she was well known by both her maiden and married names.<sup>2</sup> She is referred to as Helen Macmillan Brown throughout this thesis because that is how she styled herself in her lifetime.<sup>3</sup> Although Helen was born in Melbourne, Australia, most likely in 1857, her family immigrated to Christchurch when she was still a very young child.<sup>4</sup> Helen's most notable achievements, including her Master of Arts degree, were earned in New Zealand. Helen was an excellent student for her whole life. Her teachers in Australia and New Zealand all credited her with great intelligence and maturity. Her talents were not exaggerated. While at school in Hokitika in 1872, Helen was awarded Dux as well as prizes for Arithmetic, Grammar, Geography, Dictation, Latin, and Euclid.<sup>5</sup> In 1876 Helen matriculated at Canterbury College, where she had been enrolled as one of the earliest women students of the College in 1875.<sup>6</sup> In 1880 Helen graduated with her Bachelor of Arts, followed by her Master of Arts in 1881.<sup>7</sup> In 1882 Helen became principal of Christchurch Girls' High School (CGHS), where she had been working as a teacher, only retiring in 1894.<sup>8</sup> Helen married John Macmillan Brown in 1886.<sup>9</sup> John was a founding professor of Canterbury College, and personally enrolled Helen in the College, as well as teaching her once she was a student.<sup>10</sup> They had two daughters, Millicent in 1888 and Viola in 1897.<sup>11</sup> Helen died young, as she contracted diphtheria in 1903.<sup>12</sup> This brief outline of Helen's life gives context to the broader discussion of her memorialisation covered by this research

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best: The Life of Helen Connon 1857-1903* (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2004), 37.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Correspondence from Brown, Helen Macmillan to Brown, John Macmillan (?), 1899, John Macmillan Brown Collection (MB118, Ref 123337) Macmillan Brown Library, Christchurch, New Zealand.

<sup>4</sup> Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best*, 14.

<sup>5</sup> "Hokitika Academy," *West Coast Times*, 24 December 1872.

<sup>6</sup> Millicent Baxter, *The Memoirs of Millicent Baxter* (Queen Charlotte Sound: Cape Catley, 1981), 14.

<sup>7</sup> Charlotte Macdonald, Merimeri Penfold and Bridget Williams, ed., *The Book of New Zealand Women: Ko Kui Ma Te Kaupapa* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1991), 152.

<sup>8</sup> Baxter, *Memoirs*, 16.

<sup>9</sup> "A Notable Wedding in Christchurch," *Auckland Star*, 10 December 1886.

<sup>10</sup> Baxter, *Memoirs*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 16, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best*, 114.

project, as well as illustrating why she is a person worthy of historical study. The aim of this thesis is to show how Helen has been remembered by the public, her family, in biography, and how one might recover the real Helen underneath all of this memory.

This research project explores the life and memory of Helen Macmillan Brown. Individual and collective memories of the past vary to a great degree because they are always being constructed in new ways, using different modes of remembering each time.<sup>13</sup> Historians are interested not just in what is remembered but in *how* it is remembered.<sup>14</sup> In the case of this thesis, the examples of Helen's memorialisation – physical sites, her family's memoirs, biography – all demonstrate different modes of remembrance, referred to as memory. Helen has been memorialised, forgotten, and remembered in many different ways over the past century. Helen lived and died in an imperial world, where she may have viewed herself as a British subject – born in Australia, growing up in New Zealand, and with deep connections to Britain. However, she has since been transformed into a New Zealand heroine. Despite her striking achievements, Helen has not been a household name for many years. She has barely been recognised by scholars, with only one full-length biography written about her since 1905. She was a progressive woman for her time, encouraging girls to take up tertiary education, and was a working mother for most of her career as principal. While little has been written about her academically, she has been memorialised in many different ways. The remembrance of Helen reveals who she was to the people around her, both in her inner circle of family and friends, and in wider New Zealand society. This memorialisation of Helen has changed over the years since her death, as memory of her has generally been in decline as other, newer heroes are celebrated. Helen left very few sources of her own perspective behind. The real Helen is therefore difficult to find. However, the few sources that do remain, in particular her photography, can give some idea of what Helen valued and how she saw her place in the world.

The key primary sources this research paper will make use of include correspondence and newspapers. As noted by Margaret Lovell-Smith, Helen seems to have written very little.<sup>15</sup> Of particular interest are the letters written by Edith Searle Grossmann, Helen's protégé, friend, and eventual biographer. Her letters provide an insight into her perspective of Helen and Grossmann's relationship with John. For example, she writes that John and '... Helen were

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<sup>13</sup> Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (New York: De Gruyter, 2008), 6-7.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best*, 8.

what you have called the “pro-parents” of my mind.’<sup>16</sup> Grossmann’s relationship with Helen and John added to her bias and the way that she presented information about the two. The main problem with these letters is that they give only one side of the conversation. References may be made to people and events that are known only to the letter writers, requiring context that may be impossible to find from other sources. When used in combination with secondary sources this can be overcome to a degree, but it is not always possible.

Newspapers are sourced from the PapersPast online archive. Several articles across a variety of papers were published about Helen throughout her lifetime, and also in response to her death and memorialisation. The articles written during her lifetime are useful primary sources because they indicate how Helen was viewed by the wider public. Although there is potential for bias or inaccuracy, this can often say something important about the subject, author, or newspaper. Newspaper accounts become particularly useful from the time of Helen’s death, as they can show what she was best known for at the end of her life.

There is a dearth of secondary sources on Helen, but there are two key biographies. The first was written by Grossmann a few years after Helen’s death, while the second was published in 2004 by Margaret Lovell-Smith. Grossmann’s biography is a key source because it was written and published so close to Helen’s lifetime. However, it is also problematic because Grossmann’s biography serves more as an obituary than as a scholarly piece detailing Helen’s life.<sup>17</sup> There is a significant undercurrent of first-wave feminism in Grossmann’s defence of Helen which gives her biography a very specific purpose.<sup>18</sup> Lovell-Smith’s biography of Helen’s life seems to be largely concerned with correcting errors of fact that appear in popular narratives of Helen’s life, particularly Grossmann’s. Lovell-Smith’s work draws upon the few primary sources extant and checks them thoroughly to provide a more accurate picture of Helen’s life. Thus Lovell-Smith’s biography will serve as the main basis for details about Helen.

In addition to these biographies that focus exclusively on Helen, there are several collective biographies of New Zealanders that feature her. These include the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* and the slightly earlier *The Book of New Zealand Women*. These works place Helen amongst the country’s most famous and significant citizens. As these were published prior to Lovell-Smith’s work, these smaller biographies draw upon the public

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<sup>16</sup> Correspondence from Grossmann, Edith Searle to Brown, John Macmillan, 1904, John Macmillan Brown Collection (MB118, Ref 122912) Macmillan Brown Library, Christchurch, New Zealand.

<sup>17</sup> Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Heather Roberts, *Where Did She Come From? New Zealand Women Novelists 1862-1987* (Wellington: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 4.

narratives perpetuated by Grossmann's work. One of the themes explored in this thesis is the way that romantic narratives of Helen interplay with these later biographical and scholarly works in the forging of iconic heroines.

This research paper also situates Helen in wider New Zealand society and the general treatment of women in tertiary education at the time. Key pieces of scholarship on this area are *Colonial Cap and Gown: Studies in the Mid-Victorian Universities of Australasia* by W. J. Gardner, and *In Their Own Right: Women and Higher Education in New Zealand Before 1945* by Kay Morris Matthews, published in 1979 and 2008 respectively. Both of these works employ quantitative data to show trends and patterns in regard to the tertiary education of women as well as their subsequent career paths. They also include case studies of women such as Helen and her contemporaries and friends, but it is the analysis of wider society that is of greatest relevance to this research paper. Gardner's Australasian focus is broader than Matthews', which centres on New Zealand universities only. Matthews' work, however, is more recent and benefits from advances in the relevant scholarship. This thesis contributes to these overlapping areas of New Zealand historiography by exploring the interplay of public, private, and scholarly forms of testimony in the remembering of Helen Macmillan Brown.

Chapter One explores the public memorialisation of Helen that appeared following her death. Public memorials included newspapers and physical sites of remembrance. Obituaries published immediately after Helen's death represented the first attempts to craft Helen's public narrative. The physical sites of remembrance analysed include a bust on the Canterbury College campus and Helen Connon Hall. These sites consolidated a strong public link between Helen's memorialisation and her roles within women's education. Such public and institutional sites of memory can also be used to gauge the changing remembrance of Helen, as these sites disappear or are reinterpreted over time.

The personal remembrances of Helen written by her family show the impact of her public memorialisation. Chapter two explores memoirs published by Helen's husband John and their daughter Millicent. The narrative built up around Helen in the public sphere can be found within her family's writing. These autobiographies show how Helen was viewed by those closest to her. However, they also ultimately underline how Helen was not truly known even by her family. By the time they wrote about her, the distance she had created through her private nature and the decades it had been since she was alive, allowed the public ideals of Helen to appear as part of the family's perception of who she was.

Biographies of Helen, although few, demonstrate how she has been seen in published accounts of her life. Chapter Three brings the two threads of Chapters One and Two together.

The first biography was published by Edith Searle Grossmann, in 1905, titled *Life of Helen Macmillan Brown*. In the 1990s, *The Book of New Zealand Women* and *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* were published, each with a profile of Helen. Lastly, in 2004 Margaret Lovell-Smith wrote the biography *Easily the Best: The Life of Helen Connon 1857-1903*. The overall purpose of these books has been to highlight Helen as a significant individual. However, they each have other agenda, such as to show Helen as a feminist icon or to create a scholarly account of her life.

Finally, Chapter Four poses the question as to whether we can ever recover the real Helen. Helen's photography is one of few key examples of her own voice that have survived. The subjects of her photographs, and her interest in photography, say important things about who Helen was and what it was that she considered to be important. Photography is not the most conclusive way to figure out the inner workings of someone's mind because it relies upon subjective analysis of an object. However, it may provide some insight into how Helen viewed the world.

Through an exploration of memorialisation and remembrance, this thesis creates a fresh perspective on the life and legacy of Helen Macmillan Brown. Whereas a traditional line of historical inquiry would view Helen only in the light of her considerable achievements, or even consign her to be a peripheral figure in the life of her husband, focusing on how Helen has been remembered provides new sources and insight even in the near-complete silence of her own voice. An analysis of this memory can reveal important information about both the subject and creator of the narrative. These different types of memory, including public, personal, and biographic, give a variety of angles from which to better understand how Helen has been remembered. Importantly, this analysis is capped off with an exploration of Helen's photography as a source of her own perspective. Memory demonstrates how people viewed Helen, while her photography shows how close they came to the real Helen Macmillan Brown.

## Chapter One:

### *Helen's Death and Her Public Afterlife*

The story of Helen Macmillan Brown begins rather perversely with her death. Although she was known for the accomplishments that she made in life, her mythology and her memorialisation did not truly begin until she was dead. Dying relatively young, in her mid-forties, Helen left behind a devastated family and a legacy cut tragically short.<sup>19</sup> Both the nature of Helen's death and her achievements in life combined to create the lasting image of Helen. Her memorialisation began at the announcement of her death and has included newspaper obituaries, busts and plaques, the establishment of scholarships in her name, and the naming of Helen Connon Hall. Many of these were organised by John but others were the responsibility of CGHS. In recent years, memorials for Helen have waned. Her memory has some presence at CGHS, but much less at the University of Canterbury. This forgetting of Helen has likely occurred as more recent, more relevant heroes have captured public attention. Yet she is an important person to remember as her personal achievements and trailblazing efforts for women in higher education remain significant.

The outpouring of public memorialisation that was prompted by Helen's death has strongly shaped the narrative of Helen's life. Helen died on holiday in Rotorua on 22 February 1903.<sup>20</sup> She was being treated for diphtheria, which was recorded as the cause of death.<sup>21</sup> She was buried in Rotorua the next day, likely because of the infectious nature of diphtheria.<sup>22</sup> Despite not having a funeral in Christchurch, where she lived, schools and the College hung their flags at half-mast in response to her death.<sup>23</sup> The most immediate published source in relation to Helen's death were the newspaper obituaries that appeared across the country. The newspapers that reported on her death included the *New Zealand Herald*, the *New Zealand Times*, the *Manawatu Standard*, the *Evening Post*, the *Otago Witness*, the *Otago Daily Times*, the *Lyttleton Times*, and the *Press*. Both the *Press* and the *Lyttleton Times* wrote long articles detailing Helen's life and achievements, as well as elaborating upon her illness and sudden death.<sup>24</sup> The *Lyttleton Times* said:

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<sup>19</sup> Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best*, 114.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> "Mrs Macmillan Brown," *Press*, 23 February 1903.

The death is announced of Mrs Macmillan Brown, who passed away at eight o'clock on Sunday morning... Mrs Brown had not been in good health for some time, having suffered much from insomnia, and... had hardly arrived at Rotorua when diphtheria developed, to which she succumbed... Mrs Brown... was one of the distinguished band of early students at Canterbury College.... At the University her career was brilliantly successful, and she was the first lady in the British Dominions to attain the degree of Master of Arts... It was through her zeal, ability and enthusiasm that the Christchurch Girls' High School was raised to a leading position among the secondary schools of the colony.<sup>25</sup>

Other papers featured much briefer notices, such as this piece in the *New Zealand Times*:

Mrs MacMillan Brown, wife of Professor MacMillan Brown, of Canterbury College, died at Rotorua on Sunday last, from diphtheria. As Miss Helen Connon she was one of the most brilliant Canterbury College students of her time. For some years she was principal of the Girls' High School, Christchurch. She was married fifteen years ago to Professor MacMillan Brown.<sup>26</sup>

Or this from the *Otago Witness*, which also included the unexpected nature of her death:

News was received in Christchurch on Sunday of the death at Rotorua of the wife of Professor Macmillan Brown, the cause being diphtheria. The lady was a brilliant scholar, and was, as Miss Helen Connon, head mistress of the Girls' High School Christchurch, and was well known in academic circles. She had been ailing for some time, and had gone for a holiday to Rotorua, but news had been received by her friends in Christchurch to the effect that she was recovering, and her death, therefore, came as a shock to those who knew her.<sup>27</sup>

In these briefer pieces, there is a strong emphasis upon Helen's marriage to John. She is referred to as his wife in the opening line of both of these examples, and in the *Otago Witness* piece she

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<sup>25</sup> "Obituary," *Lyttleton Times*, 24 February 1903.

<sup>26</sup> "Personal," *New Zealand Times*, 25 February 1903.

<sup>27</sup> "Obituary," *Otago Witness*, 25 February 1903.

is not named until after her husband has been. This is despite the fact that these obituaries are ostensibly for Helen.

However, they also emphasise Helen's educational achievements in relation to her own studies at Canterbury College and as principal of CGHS. These brief examples are not specific about Helen's degrees, but both of the longer obituaries refer to them, as does the short piece in the *Evening Post*.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps it was due to issues of space that this specificity was left out of the other smaller articles, although this seems unlikely given the *New Zealand Times* had room to refer to John as her husband at both the beginning and the end of the piece.<sup>29</sup> Despite this, Helen's career as principal is a common point across each of these obituaries. This suggests that at the end of her life Helen was better known for her work in education, rather than for her personal academic achievements. However, in the *New Zealand Herald* article it is suggested that she left the job when she married, which published that '... she was principal of the Girls' High School in Christchurch, and held that position until her marriage, 15 years ago, to Professor Macmillan Brown, of Canterbury College.'<sup>30</sup> Helen actually married three years into her principalship, which lasted over eleven years.<sup>31</sup> It was an important aspect of Helen's life that she did not end her employment once she was married, and this mistaken assumption shows how unusual this choice was. Repeated references to Helen as John's wife and to her roles in education are important aspects of Helen's public narrative. As the first instances of her public memorial these features have played a key role in shaping the way that Helen has been remembered.

Helen's physical presence in Christchurch was also established around the time of her death. In 1904, a bust of Helen, commissioned by John, was erected in the Great Hall at Canterbury College.<sup>32</sup> This bust is currently on display in the Teece Museum (*Fig. 1*), with a replica bust and the original plaque detailing Helen's life and achievements back on display in the refurbished Great Hall (*Fig. 2*). The plaque reads: 'Helen Macmillan Brown M.A. 1860 –

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<sup>28</sup> "Personal Matters," *Evening Post*, 25 February 1903.

<sup>29</sup> "Personal," *New Zealand Times*, 25 February 1903.

<sup>30</sup> "Wellington News Notes," *New Zealand Herald*, 25 February 1903.

<sup>31</sup> Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best*, 41, 60.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.



*Figure 1. The original bust of Helen (third from left) on display in the Teece Museum, Christchurch. James White, Helen Connon, 1903, marble bust, UC-MBL-0398, University of Canterbury Art Collection, Christchurch, New Zealand. © UC, Photographer Duncan Shaw-Brown. Reproduced with permission.*



*Figure 2. The replica bust of Helen with plaque in the Great Hall, taken by the author in 2018. The Great Hall, Arts Centre of Christchurch.*

1903. Lady Principal of Girls' High School 1882 – 1894. The first woman to graduate from Canterbury College B.A. 1880. And the first to graduate with honours in a British university M.A. 1881.' Unlike the newspaper articles, the bust is one of the few instances of Helen's memorialisation from this time that does not mention her marriage, focusing only on her personal achievements. Perhaps this is because the bust was commissioned by John, and the tie was implicit in the use of only her married name. Nevertheless, it is significant that this site of remembrance concerns Helen and her work alone. Her bust sat high on the wall above the entrance to the Great Hall, overseeing generations of Canterbury students. Helen may have acted as a motivator for those early women students, her presence a reminder that she had opened the doorway to higher education for them.

The next significant memorialisation of Helen came with the establishment of Helen Connon Hall. The hall was named for Helen in 1919.<sup>33</sup> It was a hall for women, following in Helen's footsteps and encouraging girls to engage in higher education. In 1923 the hall filled its capacity of thirty students, demonstrating both its popularity and the need at the time for women-only spaces within tertiary education.<sup>34</sup> This was much like the women's common room in Helen's university days, which allowed the women students a place on campus in which to work and mingle in a socially appropriate setting.<sup>35</sup> In what might be seen as a continuation of Helen's legacy of firsts, the first woman lecturer of History at the University of Canterbury, Alice Candy, was later made warden of Helen Connon Hall in 1935.<sup>36</sup> In the 1970s, the opening of the new Ilam campus disrupted these public remembrances of Helen. Students no longer attend lectures within the Great Hall. Similarly, Helen Connon Hall was disestablished in 1974 as part of this move.<sup>37</sup> The loss of these sites from within the University has created a period of forgetting, instead of a celebration of Helen as a significant graduate of the University. There are some remaining traces of these physical sites of remembrance for Helen. For example, bursaries that originated with a donation made by John Macmillan Brown continue to be awarded to female residents of University of Canterbury affiliated halls.<sup>38</sup> This demonstrates some of the ways in which Helen's legacy was tied closely

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<sup>33</sup> "Women's Corner," *Press*, 27 May 1919.

<sup>34</sup> "Canterbury College," *Press*, 19 December 1923.

<sup>35</sup> Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best*, 32.

<sup>36</sup> "Miss A. M. F. Candy, M.A., Lecturer in History at Canterbury College, Who Has Been Appointed Lady Warden of Helen Connon Hall," *Press*, 1 October 1935; Katie Pickles, "Colonial Counterparts: The First Academic Women in Anglo-Canada, New Zealand and Australia," *Women's History Review* 10, no. 2 (2001): 275.

<sup>37</sup> Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best*, 116.

<sup>38</sup> "Helen Macmillan Brown Bursaries," University of Canterbury, accessed September 21, 2018, <https://www.canterbury.ac.nz/scholarshipsearch/ScholarshipDetails.aspx?ScholarshipID=6935.91>.

to pioneering women in education and the support of girls to follow in her footsteps, even decades after her retirement as an educator and her death.

While Helen's remembrance has waned, memorialisation of John Macmillan Brown continues, and can be an area to locate mentions of Helen. A recent exhibit in the University of Canterbury library titled "Snapshots: Exploring a Turning Point in Japan's History" displayed various artefacts and photographs from the Macmillan Brown archive that had been collected by John Macmillan Brown from his travels in Japan.<sup>39</sup> The accompanying pamphlet primarily concerns the display, but in a biographical section makes mention of Helen: 'He went on to marry the first woman to graduate with honours in the British Empire, the highly respected academic Helen Connon (1857-1903). She, too, went on to teach, becoming principal of Christchurch Girls' High School.'<sup>40</sup> The purpose of the exhibition was unrelated to Helen, but it is of note that her small mention was tied up in her achievements in education as student and as principal. This is most often how she has been recorded. It is also significant that John remains a prominent presence on campus, yet in this exhibition Helen appears only in relation to him. John does have a permanent site of remembrance on campus. The Macmillan Brown library, founded with John's large personal collection was named for him. This makes it all the more surprising, given the previous prominence of Helen as an alumnus, that another building has not been named for her. Perhaps by the 1970s a heroine of the nineteenth century was deemed too old-fashioned. Yet Helen was a modern woman by the standards of her day. More importantly, von Haast, Macmillan Brown and Hight were nineteenth-century men, and their memorial buildings have remained.

Unlike the University, the memorialisation of Helen was prominent at CGHS both soon after Helen's death and to some extent today. Immediately after her death a memorial was held at the school, and money was collected by the Old Girls' Association – of which Helen was president when she died – to fund a scholarship prize for Latin and English students of the school.<sup>41</sup> Helen was remembered by her students very positively, as a strong, engaging teacher and as a woman to emulate.<sup>42</sup> In this way she was a heroine in life, although the evidence for this is based around recollection, which suggests that Helen's later characterisation as such may have influenced memories of Helen the teacher. There are very few sources that write

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<sup>39</sup> Meredith Sim, *Snapshots: Exploring a Turning Point in Japan's History* (Christchurch: University of Canterbury, 2018), 2.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best*, 115.

<sup>42</sup> Barbara Peddie, *Christchurch Girls' High School 1877-1977* (Christchurch: Christchurch High School Old Girls' Association, 1977), 30.

about Helen as a teacher while she was still alive. Yet there is one pupil named Elsie Low, identified by Lovell-Smith, who wrote in her diary about Helen.<sup>43</sup> Low wrote in 1891:

I wonder shall I rise as Mrs Brown has risen? I am not in such a low position as she was, and what is she now! The other afternoon at the High School sports, and she walked up the green with her dear little girl, every eye was fixed on her, partly because she is such a handsome and stately woman, and partly because she is the wife of Prof. Brown and also mistress of the Girls' High School.<sup>44</sup>

Like all the recollections written after Helen's death, this piece demonstrates the way in which Helen became an object of admiration for the students. This memory shows that while the recollections that have been written after Helen's death have inevitably been affected by it, even in her life Helen was much admired by her students. The Old Girls' Association published Edith Searle Grossmann's *Life of Helen Macmillan Brown*, with the profits going to the Helen Macmillan Brown Prize Fund.<sup>45</sup> In this way, Helen was vicariously helping girls to learn even after her death. Helen has a continued presence at CGHS, much more so than at the University of Canterbury. For example, the school's houses include Cannon House, named for Helen, and she is mentioned in the school's prospectus.<sup>46</sup> It seems that Helen's role as principal is more valued today than her academic achievements, demonstrated by the contrast between her memorialisation on the University campus and within CGHS. This might be because it is a school for girls, and so the celebration and remembrance of women is more of a priority than for the coeducational University. Either way, there is a strong community, built up from the time of Helen's death, between the school, the Old Girls', and the old girls themselves. They all contribute to Helen's remembrance in important ways.

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<sup>43</sup> Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best*, 66-67.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Edith Searle Grossmann, *Life of Helen Macmillan Brown* (Christchurch: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1905), 5.

<sup>46</sup> "Prospectus," Christchurch Girls' High School, accessed August 4, 2018, <https://www.cghs.school.nz/enrolment/prospectus/>.

## Chapter Two:

### *Personal Family Remembrances*

John Macmillan Brown and daughter Millicent both wrote and published memoirs of their lives. Their memoirs are key sources showing Helen as a wife and mother. These personal family remembrances are not entirely new perspectives on Helen. In fact, they interact heavily with the public narratives explored in the previous chapter. While these memoirs can contribute family-based roles in which to view Helen, the memorialisation of her character that occurs in these works is almost no different from that of the public. Looking at the family memories of Helen shows that even they found the real Helen inaccessible. What is left of her, then, is her public and private memorialisation and the relationship between the two.

Helen's memory can be found in the memoirs written by family members, yet Helen herself is much harder to find. Helen appears only briefly in these works, and the authors seem to have struggled with Helen's lack of openness both in writing and in person. Millicent and John both wrote their memoirs late in life, decades after Helen's death. This has a great influence on what is included. Millicent highlights some childhood memories of Helen in her autobiography *The Memoirs of Millicent Baxter*. For a prolific writer, John wrote surprisingly little of his late wife in his memoirs, though the emotional nature of what he wrote about her death suggests that perhaps reflecting extensively on her life was too painful. The family recollections give some insight into what Helen meant to those family members, but because of their brevity they still leave Helen frustratingly enigmatic. The common threads of the public memory of Helen continue to appear even in the personal family recollections.

Published several decades after John's death and edited by his younger daughter, Viola, *The Memoirs of John Macmillan Brown* includes very few personal memories of Helen as his wife.<sup>47</sup> Helen first appears in the autobiography in the chapter "Marriage and Home", in the final quarter of the book.<sup>48</sup> He writes:

My eye had long rested on one of my earliest lady students, Miss Helen Connon, who had been the first woman to take an honours degree in the British Empire. She was a very beautiful girl, much admired by some of the most successful men students and by

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<sup>47</sup> John Macmillan Brown, *The Memoirs of John Macmillan Brown* (Christchurch: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1974), xii-xiii.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

others who were not students. She was now head of the Girls' High School and was making it a great success, in numbers and in the Entrance Scholarship examination of the university.<sup>49</sup>

It seems that Helen was a popular woman, but she was determined to hold onto her position at CGHS. John credits his role as her teacher for the courage necessary to ask Helen to marry him, knowing that she had had several other offers which she had turned down.<sup>50</sup> She accepted John's offer of marriage on the condition that he allowed her to continue working for at least two or three more years.<sup>51</sup> While Helen may have simply liked John best of all her suitors, his willingness to accept and even encourage her independence as a working woman seems to have been an important factor in the positive response to his suit. John, on the other hand, considered his marriage to Helen to be a significant achievement. His emphasis upon the large number of Helen's other potential suitors shows how he perceived himself to be the winner of a great prize.<sup>52</sup> In fact, his advice to other graduates for a successful marriage was to marry another graduate, yet this was not a common practice at the time.<sup>53</sup> In a 1975 lecture, Gardner noted of John that '... he was well aware that the greatest triumph of his life was to persuade Helen Connon to marry him.'<sup>54</sup> The pair were married towards the end of 1886, once school had finished for the year.<sup>55</sup> Millicent was born around a year later.<sup>56</sup> Helen suffered her first ill-fated pregnancy a few years after Millicent's birth.<sup>57</sup> John writes that it was this latter experience and Helen's resultant destabilised health that convinced him to encourage Helen to retire from principalship.<sup>58</sup>

Following Helen's retirement, the couple decided to travel overseas, John indicating that the major purpose of the trip was to consult a specialist about his eye strain and frequent headaches.<sup>59</sup> Much of the rest of this chapter is dedicated to describing the couple's travels. Despite Helen's presence on this visit, John writes very little about her throughout these passages. One section about Helen, amongst the travel memories, refers to the birth of daughter

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<sup>49</sup> Brown, *Memoirs*, 180.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> W. J. Gardner, *Early University Life in Australia and New Zealand* (Christchurch: University of Canterbury, 1976), 33.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Brown, *Memoirs*, 181.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

Viola after the couple returned to New Zealand.<sup>60</sup> Both Helen and John went through a period of insomnia after Viola's birth, which they attempted to cure through travel.<sup>61</sup> In Millicent's preface to her father's memoirs, she recalled a second miscarriage that her mother suffered towards the end of this trip.<sup>62</sup> Millicent claimed that this failed pregnancy may have contributed to Helen's death. She suggested that this was due to poisoning through something that remained in Helen's uterus, causing ill-health that lasted until the end of her mother's life a few months later.<sup>63</sup>

However, the more significant paragraph in terms of Helen's remembrance came before Viola's birth. This passage describes an encounter with Professor Jowett, then Master at Balliol College in Oxford, and refers simultaneously to Helen's educational achievements and to her beauty.<sup>64</sup> John wrote that the Master was significantly impressed by Helen, explaining that his interest in her was because

... she had been pioneer of women in taking an honours degree and she had for some years been head of the Girls' High School in Christchurch and at the same time managed my household and hospitalities with ease and success. She was still very beautiful and had all the brightness of youth.<sup>65</sup>

This description shows that John and Helen were well aware of Helen's significance at this time, and particularly that she had been a working wife and mother. That John mentions her achievements and then also highlights Helen's physical beauty and youthfulness immediately afterwards is not unique. When writing of her mother's life and work, Millicent also made positive mention of Helen's appearance.<sup>66</sup> Although Millicent wrote that she did not personally remember her mother's good looks, she still included in her description of her mother that Helen was noticeably beautiful when described by others who had known her.<sup>67</sup> John's description of Helen's appearance is imbued by his immense pride at being the one to win her hand.<sup>68</sup> Millicent refers to this when describing Helen's looks, saying: 'She was said to be very beautiful and was much sought after. Many men wanted to marry her. My father frequently

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<sup>60</sup> Brown, *Memoirs*, 194.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, xx-xxiii.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 187-188.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>66</sup> Baxter, *Memoirs*, 15-16.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

pointed them out... and was immensely proud of having succeeded against intense competition.<sup>69</sup> However, Millicent's reference to Helen's beauty – despite admitting that she did not remember Helen as being especially beautiful – shows how the family memories of Helen were moulded by the public narrative of her life and character. The hiatus between their memoirs and Helen's death gave her public recollections time to consolidate and become part of the family's perception of Helen.

Millicent sought to distinguish herself from her famous relatives in the opening to her memoirs.<sup>70</sup> On the very first page Millicent wrote:

Before I married I was often referred to as the daughter of Professor John Macmillan Brown, one of the founding professors of Canterbury University College, or the daughter of Helen Connon, the first woman graduate with honours in the British Empire. In more recent years I have found myself known as the mother of James K. Baxter. I am myself, but I remain Mrs Archie Baxter.<sup>71</sup>

Millicent spent little time addressing her mother in her writing, choosing instead to focus more on her relationship with her husband, the conscientious objector Archibald Baxter. She wrote: 'I loved my mother, and came to terms with my father. I loved my sister, and then our two sons, but Archie has been the core of my life.'<sup>72</sup> Millicent was only fifteen when her mother died, and her sister Viola was five years old.<sup>73</sup> Having lost her mother at a young age, it is understandable that her memories of Helen would be few.

The source for Millicent's biographical material relating to her mother was the existing popular narrative, which Lovell-Smith has since proven to be embellished. Millicent's memoirs begin with a brief biography of each of her parents, including their ancestry.<sup>74</sup> Millicent's earliest memories follow, several involving her mother, and her childhood travelling around Europe.<sup>75</sup> Millicent relates the Grossmann account of how, in 1866, when the Connon family were living in Hokitika, Helen quickly outgrew the only school for girls in the area, and her mother had to convince Henry Harper to let Helen into his school for boys.<sup>76</sup> However,

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<sup>69</sup> Baxter, *Memoirs*, 16.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-17.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-29.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

according to Lovell-Smith's research of contemporary newspaper accounts, not only was Harper's school already accepting girls, but there were multiple schools for girls in the area.<sup>77</sup> Lovell-Smith also points out that the popular idea that Helen was the first student at Canterbury College is not entirely factual; the College had been open for six months prior to John agreeing to register Helen as a student.<sup>78</sup> Again, Millicent relates the popular story, which to her would have been fact, rather than what has since proven to be the truth.<sup>79</sup> Lovell-Smith theorises that these discrepancies are more about Helen's mother prioritising the education of her daughter than they are about Helen facing down a lack of opportunities.<sup>80</sup> Yet they also demonstrate once again that the popular mythology of Helen's life formed part of her family's personal remembrance.

Even through analysis of her family's writing, Helen remains largely a mystery. As John once said to Millicent: 'Your mother's mind was a closed book to me. I never could tell what she was thinking.'<sup>81</sup> The accounts of her husband and daughter are strongly influenced by Helen's public memory. Perhaps that is because Helen's public memory and her real life were not far removed from each other. Yet the disparities identified by Lovell-Smith between Helen's origin myth and the likely truth suggest otherwise. It seems that Helen's untimely death has been the most important factor in this merger between public and private memory. Had Helen lived to a similar age as John, it is possible that she may have become inspired to write her own memoirs, or to leave some other record of her own voice. Even if she did not, by being alive longer there would be less distance between the time of her death and the time of her family's memoirs. This is not to say that analysis of Helen and other women like her should be abandoned. Even if absolute truth cannot be found through her public or private memorialisation, what can instead be discerned is her impact.

What is most significant about Helen's memorialisation, whichever form it takes, is that it demonstrates what was most important about her for the people who knew her. What emerges is her outstanding role in education. Helen is seen as a pioneer of women's education. Not only is she popularly remembered for being the first woman graduate with an honours degree, but she is also remembered as being the first girl to attend an all-boys school, the first woman and first student on John Macmillan Brown's enrolment list for Canterbury College. These memories were shaped by public narratives of her life, illustrating what made Helen a

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<sup>77</sup> Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best*, 19-21.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>79</sup> Baxter, *Memoirs*, 14.

<sup>80</sup> Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best*, 21.

<sup>81</sup> Brown, *Memoirs*, xvii.

heroine for many. Her family's memories in particular include her role as an educator. For example, Millicent recalled that at one point Helen took on a significant role in Millicent's education, teaching her subjects such as French, Spelling, and Latin.<sup>82</sup> Although John attempted to succeed Helen as Millicent's tutor following Helen's death, he was far too forceful and demanding, causing a significant rift between father and daughter.<sup>83</sup> Significantly, John's first description of Helen is in relation to her position as principal and schoolteacher.<sup>84</sup> He notes that she had a '... powerful influence... over the girls; their attitude to her was little short of worship.'<sup>85</sup> Each of these memoirs make mention of Helen's role as an educator, both formally as principal and informally as tutor to her family. As a result of this, her role as a teacher has also become central to personal memories of Helen.

Overwhelmingly, it seems, the people in Helen's life were devoted to her. Both John and Millicent comment on how much they loved Helen, which seems fairly natural as her husband and daughter.<sup>86</sup> Even Grossmann's clear love of Helen makes sense considering their friendship was close enough to allow her to write a relatively thorough biography of Helen.<sup>87</sup> Yet this affection for Helen reaches even her students, who might well have had cause to dislike their teacher given their noted hatred of homework.<sup>88</sup> Some of this glowing outlook might be attributed to Helen's death and an unwillingness to publish negative accounts of a dead woman. However, it seems unlikely that there would be absolutely no evidence of Helen being remotely dislikeable if she was at heart anything other than the kind, motivated and intelligent person she has been portrayed as.

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<sup>82</sup> Baxter, *Memoirs*, 18, 24.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31.

<sup>84</sup> Brown, *Memoirs*, 180.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Baxter, *Memoirs*, 29.

<sup>87</sup> Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best*, 7.

<sup>88</sup> Peddie, *Christchurch Girls*, 41, 47.

## Chapter Three:

### *Helen in Biography*

Despite being the first woman in the British Empire to receive a master's degree, there is remarkably little scholarship on Helen and her life.<sup>89</sup> There are two key biographies. The first, Grossmann's *Life of Helen Macmillan Brown* and the second, a century later, *Easily the Best* by Lovell-Smith. These two texts form the basis for most other biographies written about Helen such as those included in *The Book of New Zealand Women* and the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*. While each of these writers had different primary purposes for writing about Helen, their common goal has been to highlight a woman that they deem to be worthy of attention. This dissertation has a similar goal, but is an historical exploration of memory, rather than a strict biography.

Grossmann's relatively slim volume is the most valuable contemporary source on Helen's life. This is because of the immediacy of its creation after Helen's death, as it was published only two years later. The greatest issue with Grossmann's work is that her style is typical of the era: flowery and very emotional.<sup>90</sup> Lovell-Smith describes it as being more of a eulogy than a biography.<sup>91</sup> Grossmann was a friend of Helen, but as an ex-pupil was perhaps more of a protégé than close confidante.<sup>92</sup> She frames her school-days at CGHS around being part of Helen's 'special girls'.<sup>93</sup> Although Helen took a keen interest in each of her pupils, these girls in particular seem to have warranted special attention. In Edith's case, this led to extra lessons to help her to study towards the junior scholarship examination.<sup>94</sup> This supportive role continued even after Edith left school, with Helen telling Edith '... how she appreciated a novel I had just published, and how she valued it above the books of a much more successful colonial author.'<sup>95</sup> Grossmann was a novelist, who wrote several works of fiction, largely tragic romances of a feminist persuasion.<sup>96</sup> Lovell-Smith suggests that it was probably at John's

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<sup>89</sup> Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best*, 7.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Grossmann, *Life*, 39-43.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>96</sup> Roberts, *Where Did She Come From*, 4, 14-18.

request that Grossmann wrote *Life of Helen Macmillan Brown*.<sup>97</sup> She had written two novels by the time she began work on Helen's biography.<sup>98</sup>

It is likely that Grossmann's experience as a feminist writer influenced her biographic style. Her intent is to portray Helen as an ideal woman and perfect role model for young women. In the final passage of the biography, Grossmann writes:

No picture or description can quite convey the charm of her nature and her manner – her voice “ever soft, gentle, and low,” her look, her very movements, they can more be reproduced than the passing scent of flowers. Yet perhaps something of the perfume may cling to the story of her life. And if I could somehow as I myself see it, the image of a nature constant and sincere, silent and strong, beautiful and simple, a spirit which an Elizabethan poet might have loved to celebrate, I should have given my countrywomen a “lasting possession.”<sup>99</sup>

This is typical of the effusive nature of the rest of the biography. Grossmann acknowledges that Helen did not lead an activist lifestyle.<sup>100</sup> However, Grossmann makes it clear that in her view it was Helen's life choices that displayed feminist values and supported the cause.<sup>101</sup> Grossmann viewed Helen as both a personal role model and as someone to be admired and emulated by all women. Although she may have written the biography at John's request, it also seems that her purpose was to preserve Helen's memory as an ideal woman. Just as later writers of Helen's life have sought to bring her out from the shadows of time, Grossmann hoped to keep her mentor and friend in the light.

Grossmann's perception of Helen as a feminist woman and icon is important, because Helen was clearly not an activist in life. It seems odd that Helen would not have wanted to be involved in the suffrage movement because there is an important intersection between women's education and women's right to vote. This can be demonstrated in the speech given by Sir Robert Stout, Helen's former teacher in Dunedin and later Chief Justice of New Zealand, in 1908.<sup>102</sup> According to the *Greymouth Evening Star*, Stout referred to the proud tradition of women being allowed educational opportunities in New Zealand, highlighting both Kate Edger

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<sup>97</sup> Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best*, 115-116.

<sup>98</sup> “Story: Grossmann, Edith Searle,” Heather Roberts, accessed August 4, 2018, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/2g22/grossmann-edith-searle>.

<sup>99</sup> Grossmann, *Life*, 91-92.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Macdonald, Penfold and Williams, *The Book of New Zealand Women*, 151.

and Helen Connon as early tertiary female scholars.<sup>103</sup> It was noted that accessibility of education for women is necessary in a country that has women's suffrage; at the time, the right to vote for all women in New Zealand had been available for over fourteen years.<sup>104</sup> Yet Helen did not sign the 1893 petition, although women around her certainly did, including both Edger sisters and Edith Searle Grossmann.<sup>105</sup> Her signature does appear on the 1892 petition, but for some reason Helen did not continue her involvement.<sup>106</sup> Gardner notes that although graduate women might have been expected to be heavily involved in the suffrage movement, many were at a tenuous point in their careers and thus could not afford the potential risk to their jobs or promotional opportunities.<sup>107</sup> Although Helen was well-established in her career at this point, it was potentially still a risk for her, especially as she was a prominent educator. It is possibly Helen's lack of involvement in this movement that has led to the emphasis on her educational achievements in future biographies, rather than her decision to lead her life by quiet example of women's equal worth to men.<sup>108</sup> The suffrage movement has long been held up as the hallmark of nineteenth-century feminism. Helen's life clearly was that of a feminist woman. She would not have gone to all the trouble of earning her degrees, then becoming a working wife and mother, without believing in the cause.

In contrast to Grossmann's somewhat emotional book, Lovell-Smith's biography of Helen is much more about establishing the facts of Helen's life while wading through the mythologies built up around her. From significant detective work, Lovell-Smith has been able to identify several of the embellished moments that have been a part of the popular narrative of Helen's life. These mythologies are usually in relation to her achievements or her unique intellect. For example, the Hokitika story that Millicent referred to in her memoirs, which Lovell-Smith disproved through research of contemporary newspaper accounts.<sup>109</sup> Other examples include the debunking of the idea that Helen was both the first student of Canterbury College, and its first female graduate. The College had actually been running for months before John's arrival in Christchurch, so while she may have been the first student accepted by him,

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<sup>103</sup> "Higher Education," *Greymouth Evening Star*, 20 May 1908.

<sup>104</sup> "New Zealand Women and the Vote," Ministry for Culture and Heritage, accessed August 4, 2018, <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/politics/womens-suffrage>.

<sup>105</sup> "Edith Searle Grossmann," Ministry for Culture and Heritage, accessed August 4, 2018, <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/suffragist/edith-searle-grossmann>; "Kate M. Evans," Ministry for Culture and Heritage, accessed August 4, 2018, <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/suffragist/kate-m-evans>.

<sup>106</sup> Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best*, 71-72.

<sup>107</sup> Gardner, *Early University Life*, 32.

<sup>108</sup> Grossmann, *Life*, 25.

<sup>109</sup> Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best*, 16-21.

she was certainly not the College's first.<sup>110</sup> She was also not the first woman to graduate Canterbury College: she was one of two.<sup>111</sup> Anne Bolton graduated at the same ceremony (though not in person).<sup>112</sup> As Lovell-Smith points out, Bolton's name was read first.<sup>113</sup> These discrepancies do not take away from Helen's major achievements. Her master's degree remains the first in the British Empire with no current proof of a rival claim, and her work as principal can hardly be disputed.<sup>114</sup> While Lovell-Smith seeks to write a much more balanced account of Helen's life than Grossmann, she takes an almost negative approach to John. She is critical of John for spending more time at the College after marriage, and his distant attitude towards Millicent as a baby.<sup>115</sup> However, Helen was equally busy after Millicent's birth, and Millicent later recalled that Helen was not particularly physically affectionate with her either.<sup>116</sup> Lovell-Smith also considers the relationship between the two, and the impact of John's role as Helen's teacher and mentor while she was a young student.<sup>117</sup> Despite this, Lovell-Smith seems satisfied that Helen's feelings for John were genuine, and that he returned these sentiments.<sup>118</sup> The critical nature of Lovell-Smith's analysis of John (while not necessarily undeserved) perhaps is reflective of the nature of a feminist history. Lovell-Smith does not seek to glorify Helen as Grossmann does, but she must have hoped to highlight Helen and her life, or she would not have written the book at all.

The biography collections, the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* and *The Book of New Zealand Women*, were both collated in the 1990s, prior to the publication of Lovell-Smith's 2004 study of Helen. These texts feature short biographies and are based largely on secondary sources. As a result, the biographies of Helen included in these works take on some of the popular narratives and mythologies surrounding her. Like the family memoirs, without Lovell-Smith's factchecking, these biographies of Helen feature some of the incorrect popular narratives. For example, *The Book of New Zealand Women* cites Helen's birthyear as 1860 as well as relating the Hokitika school story.<sup>119</sup> The *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* entry

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<sup>110</sup> Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best*, 26.

<sup>111</sup> W. J. Gardner, ed., *A History of Canterbury: Volume II General History, 1854-76 and Cultural Aspects, 1850-1950* (Christchurch: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1971), 407.

<sup>112</sup> James Hight and Alice M. F. Candy, *A Short History of the Canterbury College* (Auckland: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1927), 41.

<sup>113</sup> Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best*, 36.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-63.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 63, 83-84.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-60.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 59, 88.

<sup>119</sup> Macdonald, Penfold and Williams, *The Book of New Zealand Women*, 150-151.

on Helen refers to the confusion of her birthdate but uses 1859 or 1860.<sup>120</sup> *The Book of New Zealand Women*, as a collection of New Zealand women's biographies, clearly has feminist aims. In collating the life stories of significant women throughout history the authors must hope to bring attention to both well-known heroines of history and their lesser-known but equally deserving compatriots.

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<sup>120</sup> "Story: Connon, Helen," Cherry Hankin, accessed August 4, 2018, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/2c28/connon-helen>.

## Chapter Four:

### *The Real Helen?*

The great problem of this thesis is that in order to analyse memory the source base is made up of the records of people other than Helen. These sources, as has been shown, are inevitably affected by issues of memory, such as the passage of time or the impact of death. What these sources cannot say is who Helen really was. The public remembrance tells us only how the general population has seen Helen. The family memoirs show her in a more intimate light, but they are still removed from Helen's own thoughts, while the biographies are a different kind of memory entirely. How did Helen view the world and her place in it? One way to answer this question is an analysis of her photography.

One of the few records of Helen that was created by Helen herself are her photographs. Helen seems to have taken it up upon purchasing a camera in England in 1896.<sup>121</sup> Of the five available photo albums, one album, known as the Green Album, definitely contains photographs taken by Helen. The Green Album can be divided into holiday photographs from Europe and family photos.<sup>122</sup> Many of them are included in *Life of Helen Macmillan Brown* in the chapters on Europe.<sup>123</sup> Owing to their archival home and the limited copies of Grossmann's work, the photographs are not well known and so have had limited impact upon Helen's popular memory. They also do not seem to have been a part of Helen's private memory, as Helen's photography is not mentioned in either John or Millicent's memoirs. Leaving the photographs out of the major sources of Helen's life has left their meaning unmediated by popular narrative. They serve as one of the only real records of Helen's life from her own perspective.

Lovell-Smith suggests that the series of letters that Helen wrote to John while they were apart on holiday in Europe towards the end of her life is the only way to identify Helen's voice.<sup>124</sup> There seem to be no other sources like it from earlier years. The letters largely speak to Helen's relationship with John and her children, but they remain very reserved.<sup>125</sup> The letters are almost formal and are distant in the sense that they convey very little of what Helen was

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<sup>121</sup> Vickie Hearnshaw, "Helen Connon An Early Photographer," *New Zealand Journal of Photography*, no. 16 (1994): 14-15.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> Grossmann, *Life*, 54-82.

<sup>124</sup> Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best*, 8.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

thinking or feeling.<sup>126</sup> While they are an example of Helen's own voice they are far from an insight into her mind in the same way that a diary might have been. Although the letters should certainly not be dismissed as a source for Helen, especially given her lack of other writing, alternative sources such as her photography become more valuable. While the use of these photographs as a source cannot be more than tentative and fragmented, some analysis can be made of her photography, in the hope of gleaning a little more information about the inner workings of Helen's mind.

Apart from the obvious age of the prints, the subjects of Helen's photography could almost be taken by a tourist today. Although originally a luxury pursuit of the upper classes, when Helen took it up photography was much more broadly available.<sup>127</sup> Helen used an 1889 No. 2 Kodak camera, which took distinctive, circular photographs.<sup>128</sup> The Green Album is Kodak branded, and contains photographs developed by the manufacturer, presumably before Helen left Europe.<sup>129</sup> These are all of the circular variety, and so were definitely taken using Helen's camera. They have therefore been attributed to Helen. The photographs in the album are often labelled in Helen's hand, supporting this ascription. Helen was very fond of physical activity and preferred to avoid crowded city centres in favour of small, remote villages.<sup>130</sup> She particularly enjoyed walking around the nearby mountains during the 1900-1901 trip when the family was based at Montreux, often taking Millicent with her.<sup>131</sup> Helen had a great love of mountains, and this is confirmed by the large number of such photographs in this album (*Fig. 3*).<sup>132</sup> However, Helen also took many photographs of her family. These are generally of Millicent and Viola. There are a series of photographs taken in Edinburgh, in the garden of Miss Lockhart (*Fig. 4*). Viola and Millicent can be seen playing outside, and a sunbathing cat also makes an appearance. These family holiday photos are exactly what one might expect a mother to take of her children today.

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<sup>126</sup> Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best*, 104.

<sup>127</sup> Angela Wanhalla and Erika Wolf, ed., *Early New Zealand Photography: Images and Essays* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2011), 13.

<sup>128</sup> Hearnshaw, "Helen Connon," 15.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

<sup>130</sup> Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best*, 94-97.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>132</sup> Grossmann, *Life*, 57, 74.



*Figure 3. Helen particularly enjoyed mountains, and many similar photographs to these appear throughout the Green Album. John Macmillan Brown Photograph Album, n.d., John Macmillan Brown Collection (MB118, Ref 25294). Macmillan Brown Library, Christchurch, New Zealand.*



*Figure 4. Millicent and Viola playing in Miss Lockhart's garden, with a cat and what appears to be Helen's shadow in the foreground. Helen's caption in the album is to the left of the photograph. John Macmillan Brown Photograph Album, n.d., John Macmillan Brown Collection (MB118, Ref 25294). Macmillan Brown Library, Christchurch, New Zealand.*

There are several loose photographs that are of a distinctly lesser quality than the Green Album. These were likely developed in Christchurch, rather than the suggested English company, and potentially by Helen herself although there is no clear evidence of this.<sup>133</sup> Like the Green Album, these photographs are largely of the family or travel. For example, one shadowy photograph taken around 1898 shows Millicent standing in the garden at Holmbank, the Macmillan Browns' Fendalton home (*Fig. 5*). Another series, possibly taken in England around 1900, depicts Viola in a sunhat playing with a doll (*Fig. 6*). Of the travel photos in this collection, there is a particularly artistic shot of Mt Saint Michel in France, also circa 1900, that appears to have been taken from inside some form of carriage, as horses are visible in the foreground of the shot (*Fig. 7*). Like the Green Album, these were circular photographs taken on the Kodak camera, and so most likely can be attributed to Helen. The repeated combination

<sup>133</sup> Hearnshaw, "Helen Connon," 15.



*Figure 5. Millicent in the garden at Holmbank, Fendalton. Helen Brown, c. 1898, Millicent Brown in Holmbank Garden, Christchurch, John Macmillan Brown Collection (MB118, Ref 12942). Macmillan Brown Library, Christchurch, New Zealand.*



*Figure 6. Viola playing with a doll outside. Helen Brown, c. 1900, Viola Macmillan Brown? John Macmillan Brown Collection (MB118, Ref 13093). Macmillan Brown Library, Christchurch, New Zealand.*



Figure 7. Photo of Mt Saint Michel, France that appears to have been taken from a horse-drawn carriage. Helen Brown, c. 1900, Mt Saint Michel, France, John Macmillan Brown Collection (MB118, Ref 13628). Macmillan Brown Library, Christchurch, New Zealand.

of travel shots and photographs of family and home reiterate that these subjects were significant to Helen.

Shelley Richardson, in her analysis of the Macmillan Brown marriage, suggested that Helen was bored after retirement, and took to running the household as she had run her school to occupy her great intellect.<sup>134</sup> Helen and John kept a typical household of the era, including domestic servants and gardeners.<sup>135</sup> Millicent and Viola were raised with the help of family and staff.<sup>136</sup> Millicent later regretted a lack of physical affection from Helen, and there was a distinct lack of involvement from John during the early years of the child-rearing.<sup>137</sup> This builds up a picture of detached nineteenth-century parenting. Yet this is in contrast to Helen's later

<sup>134</sup> Shelley Richardson, *Family Experiments: Middle-class, Professional Families in Australia and New Zealand c. 1880-1920* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2016), 185.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>136</sup> Lovell-Smith, *Easily the Best*, 63-66.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

letters to John, and particularly her photography. Writing in August 1899, during a period of separation, Helen's affection for John is clear: 'Dear Daddie, It is very nice to think that you are so near us now... The nearer the time comes the more I feel I can't wait for you any longer.'<sup>138</sup> Much of the rest of the letter is occupied with updating John on Millicent and Viola (Bunt).<sup>139</sup> The letter is designed to be an update for John during a period of separation from Helen and the family, and therefore does not contain anything like Helen's innermost thoughts or concerns. However, it still shows how her family were central to Helen's life, and her photographs support this.

The many family shots, particularly those of Millicent and Viola exploring, learning, and playing together demonstrate that family mattered to Helen. Richardson posits that this was because Helen and John were experimenting with child-rearing techniques in order to produce intelligent children.<sup>140</sup> However, this seems to reflect the educational values held by John and Helen, rather than any lack of care for the children.<sup>141</sup> The rigour with which Millicent and Viola were educated at home and the care taken to track their progress does appear to be fuelled by an almost scientific need to analyse and nurture the girls.<sup>142</sup> Yet this does not mean that this was not motivated by love. Helen's great academic achievements were hard won, and it was not an insignificant challenge that she was a woman. Helen seems to have only wanted for her daughters what she had fought for – a thorough education – and she did what she thought was necessary to give that to them. While her actions may have been controlling in some respects, the evidence created by Helen herself shows love, attention, and a great deal of care for her family.

This is not to say that Helen only cared about her family. She worked very hard for her academic achievements, and she would not have balanced her work and her position running her household for as long as she did without passion for her career.<sup>143</sup> Indeed, the way that she later combined her experience as an educator with her child-rearing shows that these were both very important aspects of Helen's life. Without more sources from Helen herself it is difficult to know what she thought about her world. The influence of her public memory and the lack of answers provided by her family make this even harder. It is tempting to wonder what Helen

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<sup>138</sup> Correspondence from Brown, Helen Macmillan to Brown, John Macmillan (?), 1899, John Macmillan Brown Collection (MB118, Ref 123337) Macmillan Brown Library, Christchurch, New Zealand.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Richardson, *Family Experiments*, 183-184.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 183-184.

might have said had she taken the opportunity to do so. What we can see from what she did say, through her photography, letters, and actions, is that Helen was a remarkable woman who was passionate about learning, teaching, and her family.

## Conclusion

Finding the real Helen Macmillan Brown is an impossible task. Even if a detailed diary of Helen's deepest thoughts and feelings were to be discovered, it would still only offer a fragmentary insight into her person. With the scarcity of sources of Helen's own voice, this task becomes even more difficult. However, it is still worth considering how Helen can be separated from the memory of her. Helen's priorities seem to be her family and education. In the narratives of her life, education is prioritised while the importance of Helen's family life is downplayed. Helen is referred to in the context of her husband, but this is not the same as an acknowledgement that her family mattered to her. She is seen as a trailblazer, working and running a household, but this angle puts her work as an educator in a position above her time spent as a wife and mother. Helen's career was important to her, but her decision to retire shows that it was no more important to her than her family. It seems clear that her two great passions were for teaching and learning, and for her family.

Public memorialisation was crucial to shaping the narrative of Helen as primarily an educator. Sources of this began with newspapers and physical sites of remembrance. These newspaper sources were obituaries that prioritised Helen's academic achievements and her position as principal of CGHS. The physical sites included the bust of Helen commissioned at her death, and the slightly later establishment of Helen Connon Hall. These physical remembrances within educational campuses demonstrate the link between Helen and teaching and learning.

The family memoirs of Helen show how this public narrative of education moulded their personal remembrances. John and Millicent's writing shows how Helen was viewed when acting as wife and mother. Owing to their use of the public mythology surrounding Helen and her education in particular, the works of her husband and daughter show how Helen was an enigmatic figure even to her family. The distance that Helen created in life, coupled with the fact that these memoirs were written many years after her death, caused this lack of connection between the real Helen and her family.

Grossmann and Lovell-Smith's books on Helen, as well as the smaller pieces in biography collections, show how Helen has been written about biographically. They each seek to fulfil different purposes, including portraying Helen as an ideal woman and creating a

definitive, accurate account of her life. Despite this, these works are united by their goal to show Helen as an important figure in New Zealand history.

Ultimately, to untangle Helen from her memory and move closer to who she really was in life, Helen's few personal sources must be addressed. Of particular value is her photography, which has in general been overlooked. Helen's photography is an example of her own voice because the photos are her creation. Helen's subjects reflect what was of significance to her. This can say important things about how Helen viewed her world. While a somewhat fragmented method of recovering Helen, it is a valuable one nonetheless.

This thesis explores the intersection between history and memory through the life and remembrance of Helen Macmillan Brown. Although the lack of sources from Helen herself makes the task of recovering the real Helen much more difficult, it also makes the study of her memory all the more powerful. In focusing on Helen through several different kinds of memory – public, physical, personal, and biographic – the various issues within each can be examined. This analysis, coupled with an exploration of what remains of Helen's voice, has aimed to come as close as possible to uncovering the real Helen Macmillan Brown.

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