

SPOTLIGHT ON NEWNHAM US ALUMNAE

LOOKING BACK SIXTY YEARS: JEAN ATCHESON

I landed at New York's Cunard pier on October 27, 1957, aged 28, as an immigrant with a job as a trainee editorial researcher at Time Inc., expecting to stay maybe a couple of years. I was looking for an adventure; I didn't know it would last a lifetime. Next year I'll be 80, and my memories encompass times as distant from the life of today as the wartime Britain of my youth was unlike this energetic, exciting land where I would make my living, marry, and bring up a family. Sixty years ago I came up to a Newnham burdened by postwar restrictions. Rationing was still in force; coal was scarce for the fires that warmed our rooms; to save electricity we used such low-wattage light bulbs that several students got headaches from eyestrain. We had spent precious clothing coupons on buying new outfits to suit our no-longer-schoolgirl status, but the New Look came in that fall, and our clothes were immediately out of date. Hemlines had dropped a good six inches!

We did our best, with every sort of subterfuge from bands of let-in, often contrasting material to gatherings of frills. None of them worked, and I remember the delight of at last being able to afford a "costume" with a nipped-in waist and yards of mid-calf-length skirt (which used to catch in the back bicycle wheel, along with the gowns that women were finally privileged to wear in our second year). The women of Newnham and Girton were a mere handful compared with the thousands of men, most of whom had spent two years doing national service and were more mature than girls like me, directly from school. Opportunities beyond lectures abounded to meet and make friends, to act, sing, perform, and play about, to whatever extent seemed appropriate in those shyer, less demonstrative days. But signed-in men visitors had to be out of college by 10 p.m., and women had to be in by midnight. My father, escorting Dame Myra Curtis home from a concert late one evening, reported a series of flutterings in the shadows as they neared the main gates, but the Principal strode on, looking neither right nor left.

We wrote all our essays and examinations in longhand. Typing was not a subject taught in British schools. But when we started looking for careers, all Women's Situations Vacant ads were seeking secretaries (with skills of at least 110 words per minute in shorthand and 50 in typing), while a man with an identical degree was not asked for any additional attributes and could enter the management stream immediately. Yet we took this situation for granted and trotted off to acquire the skills that would subordinate any woman taking dictation to the man who was giving it. The amazing thing is that -- for decades, anyway -- we didn't even resent it!



SPANNING THE GLOBE: SITA RAMASWAMI



I was born in India, but brought up mostly in Japan. I went to high school briefly in India and then to Delhi University, from where I went to Newnham. My principal at boarding school in Dehra Dun in India had been at Newnham at some point early in the century and she may have inspired me! So I grew up in the Age of Aquarius, but now, in the Age of Google, I am in touch with classmates from Japan and India, sometimes after an interval of decades.

I went to Wharton for an MBA after Newnham, and stayed on! I am now an American citizen and have lived here for more than 25 years. In 1987 I joined the World Bank, and have been here ever since, mostly based in Washington DC, but with one three year assignment in Istanbul, Turkey. I have held a variety of positions in the World Bank but currently I am in Knowledge Management, responsible for training, website development, publications and other knowledge products. Prior to joining the World Bank, I worked in New York, first as a management consultant at Grant Thornton and later, at Bankers Trust Co. (now Deutsche Bank). I'm currently based in Washington DC.

TRANSATLANTIC TIES: CATHERINE BIDART

In 2004-2005, I spent a year at Newnham studying for an LL.M. in international law and played volleyball for the Blues, actively participated in the local Democrats Abroad chapter, and enjoyed frequent visits to London to see my partner, Jean-Paul Buchanan (a Liverpool native), who was studying at the L.S.E. After graduation, I found a way to stay in Cambridge for the summer by working as a research assistant for a professor. In the fall of 2005, Jean-Paul and I returned to the U.S., where we had met in law school at U.C. Hastings in San Francisco. After our return, we spent a couple of months doing internships in Washington, DC. Deciding that the weather was better in my native California, we decided to move to its capital, Sacramento. I now work as an attorney for the California Law Revision Commission, and Jean-Paul works for a California Senator. I miss Cambridge dearly, and both of us are always looking forward to a visit to the U.K.

