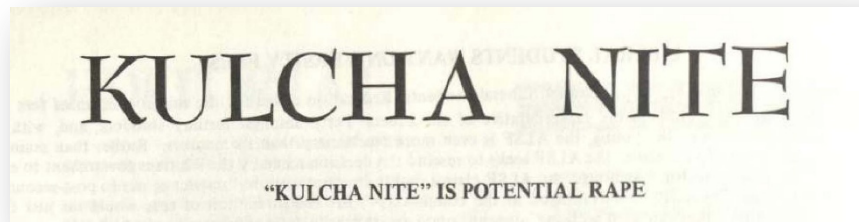


## 1980s Women's Libbers vs Engineering Fraternity's "Kulcha Nite"

Talk by Jude Conway for Hunter Living Histories, 2 March 2026



*Opus* August 1982 p6, University of Newcastle student newspaper

This talk is a nod to International Women's Day on 8 March and Women's History Month, a time of considering the challenges of the past and celebrating achievements.

The Engineering Fraternity was a University of Newcastle [UoN] student association whose annual "Kulcha Nite" started in 1967.<sup>i</sup> I started an arts degree at UoN in 1968 but my friends and I never heard a whisper. A younger friend was in a 1970s women's liberation group at the uni and recalled the all-male engineering students planning to have a stripper at the event so some of the women's libbers decided to strip one of the guys. They didn't manage that, but did pull the plug out of the amp during the show.<sup>ii</sup>

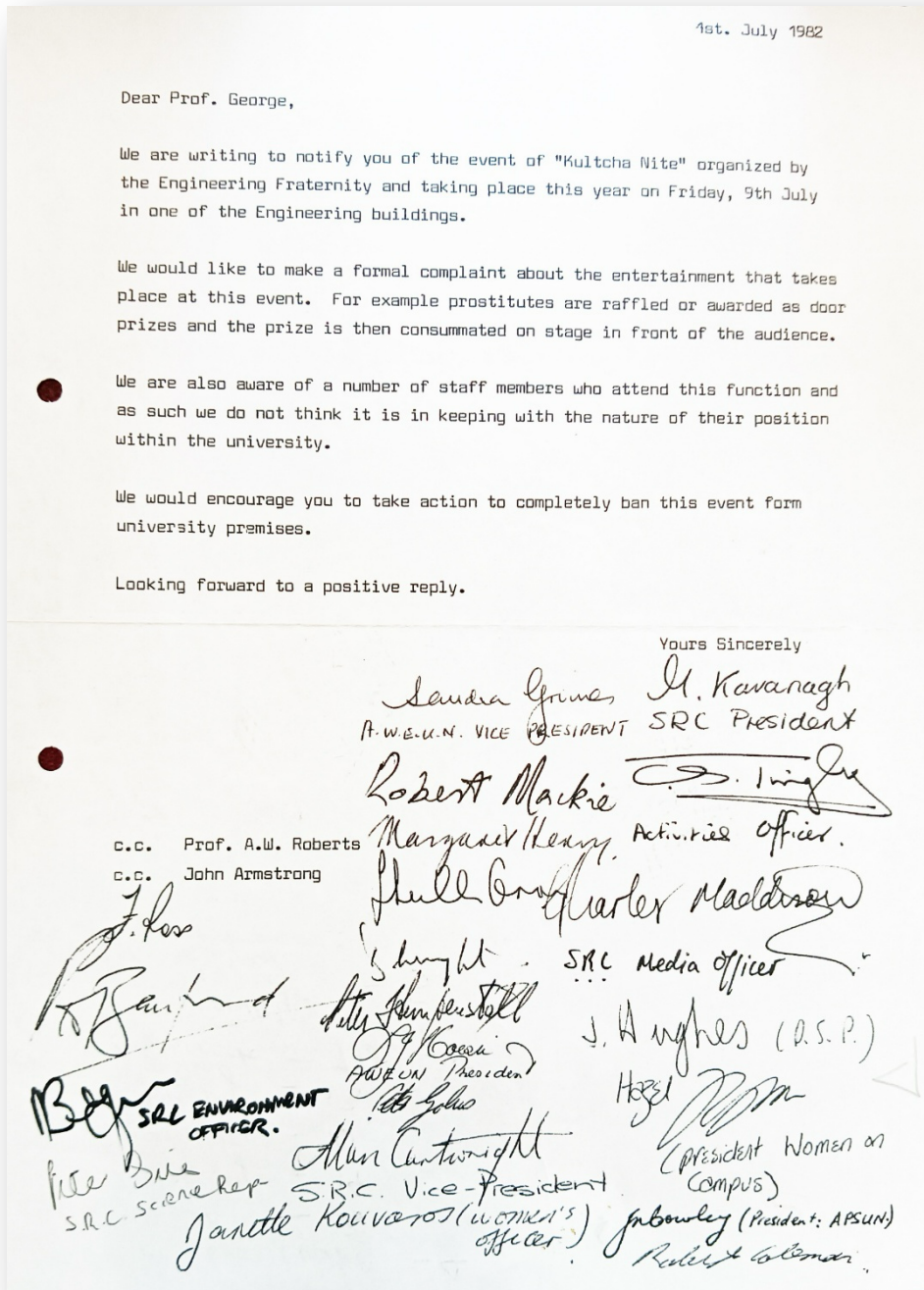
By 1979 there was a tiny dint in the male totality of engineering students. Women comprised 1.3 per cent.<sup>iii</sup>

In 1980 someone who spoke out against Kulcha Nite was harassed ... she was unnamed but I suspect that it was the radical feminist Activities Officer Chris Tingley who commenced work that year.<sup>iv</sup>

All was seemingly quiet until 1982, though the times were slowly changing.

With women's liberation encouraging girls to aspire to non-traditional occupations, female engineering students had risen to 6.2% at this university.<sup>v</sup>

1 July 1982 is an important date.



"Kultcha Nite", A6094 (xi), Newcastle University Students Association (NUSA) files, University of Newcastle Archives.

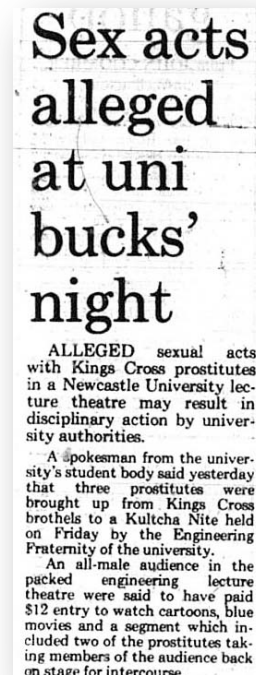
Margaret Kavanagh, the president of the Students Representative Council, the SRC and 20 other signatories including other student reps, the activities officer Chris Tingley, the first female Sociology lecturer at the uni, Sandra Grimes, a few other lecturers and our old friend Margaret Henry at the time a history tutor, wrote to the Vice-Chancellor Professor Don

George (who by the way was an engineer) with a formal complaint about the engineers' Kulcha Nite to be held on 9 July in an engineering lecture theatre. The letter asserted that in the past the engineering Fraternity had raffled sex workers or awarded them as door prizes with the prize including the opportunity to have sex with them on stage. The 21 signatories encouraged the V-C to ban the event from the university campus.<sup>vi</sup>

On the 8th July, the day before Kulcha Nite, the issue was aired in the *University News* by a letter writer who remained anonymous for fear of intimidation. They declared that Kulcha Nite was extremely degrading and offensive to women, and had been allowed to continue unchecked for too long. Also that certain academic staff played a role in legitimising the Nite by helping to sell tickets and conducting the opening.<sup>vii</sup> At that time there were 46 male academic staff in the engineering faculty and zero women.<sup>viii</sup> One frequent attender of Kulcha Nite was from another faculty - classics lecturer Godfrey Tanner.<sup>ix</sup>

Meanwhile the vice-chancellor passed the problem to professor Ken Dutton who told the president of the engineering fraternity they could either not hold the event on campus ... or give an assurance in writing that there would be no raffling or otherwise offering of "prostitutes" (as sex workers were called in those days). The student president chose the second option and Kulcha Nite went ahead on 9 July.<sup>x</sup>

Three days after Kulcha Nite the event was featured on page one of the *Newcastle Herald* which reported that an all-male audience in the packed engineering lecture theatre were said to have paid \$12 to watch blue movies and prostitutes brought up from Kings Cross brothels taking members of the audience onto the stage for intercourse. Professor Dutton declared that if anyone made those allegations formally to the vice-chancellor and they could be substantiated that would be a disciplinary matter as the university could be prosecuted for allowing immoral acts to take place on its premises. A spokesman for the engineering fraternity told the journalist that the women were not prostitutes, they were erotic dancers, and there was no prize involving females.<sup>xi</sup> The spokesman was obviously trying to argue that the Fraternity had stayed within the bounds of their written assurance to Dutton.



On 14 July the SRC wrote to the V-C with another formal complaint about Kulcha Nite saying they could provide a statutory declaration from a student witness.<sup>xii</sup> This was probably the same student who described what he had seen in a later copy of *Opus*, the student newspaper:

... two males from the audience parading onto the stage minus any pants.

... One of the sex workers announcing that Margaret Kavanagh (that was the SRC president) couldn't make it so they'd have to start without her. Then there were various feats of oral sex for about 20 minutes. The witness also commented that there were a few middle-aged men sprinkled among the engineering students and their friends.<sup>xiii</sup>

The Engineering Fraternity wrote to the *University News* to try and prove what a respectable organisation they were. Their argument that Kulcha Nite was similar to functions held by some football clubs does not help make it respectable in my eyes. They did admit that the Nite had been subject to disapproval by, to quote "certain elements" over the past few years. But they argued, their Fraternity were representative of a large population on campus which maintained respect for the university, whereas the radicals who controlled small societies were unrealistic and unstable in their membership, (presumably they meant the radical women's group) suggesting to me that the engineers were not aware of the stature of the 21 signatories to the 1 July complaint.<sup>xiv</sup>

**Engineers' party**  
From C. Rooke and 4 others

FOR reasons all too painfully obvious we add our voices to the criticism levelled at Newcastle University's engineering faculty for staging a celebration in such a way to be degrading to all women.

It is more upsetting to realise that such rituals take place within the confines of Newcastle University, where one would hope to expect that sexism would be placed alongside racism as a product of faculty education and biased thinking. Both should never be tolerated by an enlightened body.

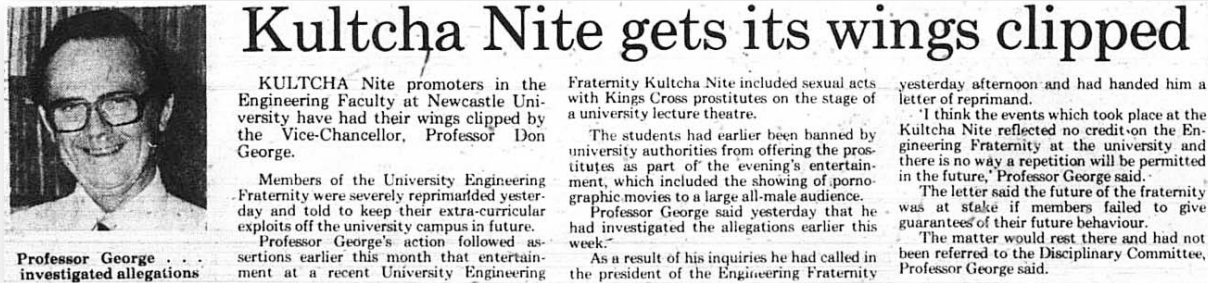
We do not view sex as a service that women offer to men, and we deplore the positions of power that males hold in this faculty at our university.

We hope that the University Council endeavours to redress the situation and make an assurance that such appalling behaviour does not happen again.

C. ROOKE, I. ALLEQUITTE,  
J. KOUVAROS, K. VERNON and  
A. ORR,  
The Terrace, Newcastle.

On 30 July a letter to the Herald from five women's libbers, four of whom I knew of course, added their voices to the criticism levelled at the Engineering students for staging a celebration that was degrading to all women and expressed the hope that the University Council would address the situation.<sup>xv</sup>

Finally, the next day's paper reported that the engineering fraternity had been severely reprimanded by the V-C and told to keep their extra-curricular activities off the university campus in future ... Which it seems they did.<sup>xvi</sup>



**Kultcha Nite gets its wings clipped**

KULTCHA Nite promoters in the Engineering Faculty at Newcastle University have had their wings clipped by the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Don George.

Members of the University Engineering Fraternity were severely reprimanded yesterday and told to keep their extra-curricular exploits off the university campus in future.

Professor George's action followed assertions earlier this month that entertainment at a recent University Engineering Fraternity Kultcha Nite included sexual acts with Kings Cross prostitutes on the stage of a university lecture theatre.

The students had earlier been banned by university authorities from offering the prostitutes as part of the evening's entertainment, which included the showing of pornographic movies to a large all-male audience.

Professor George said yesterday that he had investigated the allegations earlier this week.

As a result of his inquiries he had called in the president of the Engineering Fraternity yesterday afternoon and had handed him a letter of reprimand.

"I think the events which took place at the Kultcha Nite reflected no credit on the Engineering Fraternity at the university and there is no way a repetition will be permitted in the future," Professor George said.

The letter said the future of the fraternity was at stake if members failed to give guarantees of their future behaviour.

The matter would rest there and had not been referred to the Disciplinary Committee, Professor George said.

**Professor George . . . investigated allegations**

### Postscript

Lo and behold in late September 1982 the university appointed their first ever female lecturer to the engineering faculty.<sup>xvii</sup>

Coincidental? I doubt it. I hadn't realised the proximity of the dates until I was preparing this talk.

24 September 1982 NH p6



**Chemical engineering has a female lecturer**

Dr Judy Raper operates a distillation column at Newcastle University yesterday.

Next, a backlash. At the end of that year the all-male finance committee of the Student Union board of which 3 of the 6 had been in engineering, recommended that the position of Activities Officer be changed from full-time to part-time and... that the present officer Chris Tingley, who had been a signatory to the complaint about Kulcha Nite, be retrenched - which she was with no warning. Chris applied for the new part-time position but was not employed. She sought legal advice and The Board had to pay her \$3000 for the inhumane rapidity of her retrenchment and for being unemployed for a time.<sup>xviii</sup>

So ends an inglorious saga from our university and thank heavens there has been improvement. Currently about 16% of our engineering students are female, compared to 21% nationally, but at least we have the pleasing figure of 30-40% in chemical engineering.<sup>xix</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Letter to the Editor from the Engineering Fraternity Committee, 22 July 1982, *University News*, University of Newcastle (UoN) p2.

<sup>ii</sup> Conversations with two women who did Arts degrees at UoN in the 1970s.

<sup>iii</sup> Eileen M. Byrne, *Women and Engineering: A Comparative Overview*, Brisbane: University of Queensland, 1986, p25.

<sup>iv</sup> Letter to the Editor from Anonymous, 8 July 1982, *University News*, p2; “Union makes appointment”, 20 March 1980, *University News*.

<sup>v</sup> Byrne, *Women and Engineering*, p131.

<sup>vi</sup> “Kultcha Nite”, A6094 (xi), Newcastle University Students Association (NUSA) files, University of Newcastle Archives.

<sup>vii</sup> Letter to the Editor from Anonymous, 8 July 1982, *University News*, p2.

<sup>viii</sup> Report for a Campus Women’s sub-committee meeting at the University of New South Wales prepared by Sandra Grimes for the Association of Women Employees at the University of Newcastle, 28 May 1982 (Sandra Grimes papers).

<sup>ix</sup> Alan Roberts, “Godfrey Tanner”, Godfrey Tanner edition of *Opus*, 2002, p18.

<sup>x</sup> “Sex acts alleged at uni bucks night,” 12 July 1982, *Newcastle Herald (NH)*, p1.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xii</sup> 14 July 1982 SRC to Vice-Chancellor, A6094 (xi), NUSA files.

<sup>xiii</sup> An Angry Male Student, “Kulcha Nite: A Factual Account of an hour of the event”, *Opus*, August 1982, pp8-9.

<sup>xiv</sup> Letter to the Editor from the Engineering Fraternity Committee, 22 July 1982, *University News*.

<sup>xv</sup> C. Rooke, I. Allequite [sic, Allegritti], J. Kouvarous, K. Vernon and A. Orr, “Engineers’ Party,” Letters to the Editor, 30 July 1982, *NH*, p2.

<sup>xvi</sup> “Kultcha night gets its wings clipped,” 31 July 1982 *NH* p1.

<sup>xvii</sup> “Chemical engineering has a female lecturer,” 24 September 1982 *NH*, p6.

<sup>xviii</sup> Charles Maddison, “Chris Tingley,” March 1983 *Opus*, p23.

<sup>xix</sup> Conversation with Erica Wanless, Professor of Chemistry, UoN, 2025.