

The Admission of Women to Higher Education and Professions

1. The University of London and Women's Studies

Jacqueline Banerjee Ph.D Contributing Editor, Victorian Web

Women could attend classes at Birkbeck from 1830 and in 1832 two brave souls signed up for some lectures on electricity at London University, as University College was then known. The big breakthrough came in the late 1860s through the efforts of Henry Morley, lecturer in English, who transferred from the Anglican King's in 1865 as his Unitarian beliefs prevented him from being appointed professor. The Slade School of Fine Art, set up in 1871, accepted women and three years later the London School of Medicine for Women was founded.

Not to be daunted by the attitude of King's, F.D. Maurice, Professor English Literature and History and later Professor of Theology, founded Queen's College in Harley Street, mainly for the education of future governesses. Two early pupils were the pioneering and redoubtable Miss Buss and Miss Beale. King's also supported inter-denominational Bedford College founded in 1849 by social reformer Elizabeth Jesser Reid. Dickens sent a daughter there. Finally in 1878 not only could women attend University College but sit examinations too. This was the first university to award degrees and by 1900 nearly 30% of graduates were women.

Meanwhile at Cambridge there is a wonderful account of Philippa Fawcett, daughter of the prominent suffragette Millicent and niece of Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, on hearing she had achieved the highest marks in the Finals Tripos: "There was a great and prolonged cheering; many of the men turned towards Philippa sitting in the gallery with Miss Clough and waved their hats. Though covered in glory she cannot be named "Senior Wrangler" because this accolade must go to the highest-scoring male student. Nor can she claim even to have a degree, only to have passed the degree examination." (Olga Kenyon, 800 Years of Women's Letters. Stroud Sutton 1994, pp74-75)

2. Elizabeth Garrett Anderson – A Brief Biography

A pioneer for equality in medicine, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson was the first woman to qualify as a physician and surgeon. Elizabeth was the first dean of a British medical school and first female doctor of medicine in France and the first female mayor and magistrate in Britain. She was born in Whitechapel in 1836, the second of 11 children. The family moved to Suffolk five years later. She learned the 3Rs from her mother. A governess was appointed when she was 10. Mornings were spent in the classroom with regulated walks in the afternoons. Education was continued at mealtimes.

Now aged 13 Elizabeth went to the Boarding School for Ladies in Blackheath, run by step-aunts of poet, Robert Browning. She complained fiercely about the lack of science and mathematics instruction. When 19 Elizabeth met Emily Davies, an early feminist and co-founder of Girton College, Cambridge. In 1859 Elizabeth travelled to London to hear Elizabeth Blackwell speak, the first female doctor in the USA, appointed in 1849. Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and Emily Davies soon teamed up to open the medical profession to

women and achieve equality for a university education. The next year, 1860, Elizabeth started at Middlesex Hospital in London as a surgery nurse but was not allowed to enrol at the Medical School but could attend lectures in Latin and Greek.

Gradually she became an unwelcome presence amongst male colleagues and was asked to leave. She then applied to several medical schools including Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Glasgow and the Royal College of Surgeons. All refused her admission. A loophole enabled her to circumvent the system thanks to the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries. Now having certificates in anatomy and physiology Elizabeth was admitted in 1862 as their charter could not exclude women. In 1865 she obtained a licence from the Society to practise medicine, the first woman in Britain to do so, apart from Dr James Berry, assigned a female gender at birth. Of the 7 candidates, 3 passed with Elizabeth achieving the highest marks. The Society then changed the rules to prevent other women qualifying. Not until 1876 was the Medical Act passed, allowing British medical authorities to license all qualified applicants, irrespective of gender.

A hospital medical post was still barred so in late 1865 Elizabeth set up her own practice at 20 Upper Berkeley Street, London. A cholera epidemic swept the capital the next year by which time Elizabeth had opened an outpatients dispensary at 69 Seymour Place to enable women to receive treatment from a female physician. She then heard that the dean of the medicine faculty of the Sorbonne was in favour of admitting women. In 1870 she received her degree. By now back at the dispensary this was transformed into the New Hospital for Women and Children which moved to Marylebone Street in 1874. She still had to combat fierce male resistance to higher education. In the same year an article appeared from Henry Maudsley on 'Sex and Mind in Education.' It argued that education for women reduced reproductive capacity and may cause "nervous and even mental disorders."

Undaunted, in the very same year of 1874 she co-founded London School of Medicine for Women in conjunction with Sophia Jex-Blake and became a lecturer in the only teaching hospital in Britain to offer courses to women. Elizabeth spent the rest of her career there and was dean from 1883 to 1902. Later, the School became the Royal Free Hospital of Medicine before becoming part of University College, London. A London hospital was named after her, now a dedicated wing of University College Hospital in Euston Road. A plaque stands in Tavistock Square dedicated to Louisa Brandreth Aldrich-Blake, the first female to achieve a coveted Master of Surgery, who worked at the Elizabeth Garrett Hospital from 1895.

3. Attitude of the British Medical Association

Professor Anne Crowther, Centre for the History of Medicine, Glasgow University

The BMA was founded in 1832 by Sir Charles Hastings, a doctor in Worcester. It was known as the Provincial and Medical Surgical Association. Hastings sought a 'friendly and scientific forum' for doctors to advance and exchange medical knowledge. In 1855 the organisation became the BMA but not until In 1873 was a woman admitted. Elizabeth Garrett Anderson remained the only female member for 19 years.

Joseph Lister, known for originating antiseptic techniques in surgery, was an outspoken critic of the admission of women who were not allowed to join his medical students in Edinburgh. Female students had the greatest difficulty in attending classes on anatomy and surgery, "the indelicate subjects, not suited, unlike say botany for mixed classes." Clinical experience was even harder to gain. Little wonder there was such medical ignorance on sexual biology.

Charles West, a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, was fiercely resistant also. In 1878 he launched a scathing attack, making a distinction between nursing and medical careers that drew recruits from different classes of society. Nursing needed a shorter and less complete education, requiring "technical skills, a nimbleness of hand, gentleness, patience and implicit obedience but it does not give scope for the higher power of mind, and leaves the cravings of the intellect unsatisfied."

West had not finished. Medical women "had to counter objections voiced by a number of opponents of all higher education for women." Of concern was that a medical career "would develop their brains to the detriment of their reproductive organs and leave them unfit for marriage and motherhood. These learned maidens might do well to remember that plants under cultivation lose their natural uses." He then cited Florence Nightingale as the embodiment of nurse training "as a proper preparation for woman's domestic role."

Two years earlier, in 1876, Russell Gurney's Bill was accepted by Parliament and authorised British examining bodies to include women, if they wished, albeit in slow stages by issuing licences and then university degrees. As Dr Laura Kelly writes, a permissive Act of Parliament, whilst formalising medical education, led to hostility and the increasing exclusion of women. There was little choice but to go abroad to qualify such as the more liberal Zurich. The sting in the tail was being unable to practise in the UK that did not recognise qualifications from European Universities, but Ireland did accept these. The enabling 1876 Act did too. Sophia Jex-Blake was ecstatic. It was for her "the turning point in the whole struggle."

This did not deter St Thomas's Hospital physician Jasper Risdon Bennett. By now a Fellow of the Royal Society his views were made abundantly clear in a BMJ article of 16 February 1878. He posed a series of questions, raising concerns about disrupting the efficiency of education arrangements and medical institutions, deterring the best class of male students who would have to sit alongside women in their anatomical and physiological studies, imposing a taboo on certain subjects and more generally adverse effects that female membership would bring.

4. Achieving Equality at Oxford & Cambridge Universities

Oxford passed a statute in 1875 allowing examinations for women that approximated to undergraduate level. The first four women's colleges were established through the efforts of the Association for Promoting the Higher Education of Women (AEW). Lady Margaret Hall (1878) was followed by Somerville a year later. The first 21 students attended lectures in rooms above a local baker's shop. These two colleges were followed by St Hilda's in 1893.

In 1916 women were admitted as medical students on par with men and in 1917 Oxford accepted financial responsibility for women's examinations. On 7 October 1920 women became eligible for admission as a full member of the University and were given the right to

take degrees. Seven years later in 1927 the dons created a quota, limiting the number of female students to a quarter of the male intake, a ruling which was not abolished until 1957.

An article in the Observer of 30 May 1998 has the heading: At last, a degree of honour for 900 Cambridge women. When Elizabeth Grayton graduated from Girton College, Cambridge in 1936 after studying economics, she was thrilled to receive a certificate in the post, even though only a titular degree, not a full one. From the first intake in 1859 until 1948 women had to make do with a mailed University certificate. Only in 1998 was this injustice rectified. The first female students lived and studied in a college set up in Hitchin, 30 miles away. Its location was chosen so that male undergraduates would not feel intimidated by the presence of five young ladies. Their respective worlds would scarcely connect.

The tardiness of Cambridge, 28 years behind Oxford, was difficult to explain or pinpoint said Juliet Campbell, Mistress of Girton. When the first vote was taken in 1897 there was she says a tremendous wave of anti-women feeling. A second vote in 1921 was also lost, heralding a long wait of 26 years to December 1947 when a resolution was carried with the then Queen (Queen Mother) receiving an honorary degree in the Senate House the following October. In the 1890s women were almost completely segregated. Even in 1933 female students had to sign a book if visiting a male student's room and woe betides if not back by 10 pm. Discrimination applied to the wearing of gowns too; a male preserve.

5. Admission to Legal Profession – Heather Hallett (Guardian: 10 February 2011)

Dr Ivy Williams was a true pioneer, being the first woman to be called to the bar and first to teach law at an English university. Born in 1877, she had taken and sailed through all her law exams by 1903 but university regulations at the time prevented her receiving her BA, MA or BCL. However, in 1920 the regulations on female students were changed and she received the credit she deserved, as did many other women.

She now set her heart on being called to the bar, not, it seems, for her own sake but to offer free legal advice to the poor. She expressed her determination, in an article for Woman's World magazine in 1921, that if her application to join the bar was unsuccessful she would petition parliament. Fortunately, she secured the support of some powerful Inner Templars and the doors of the Inner Temple - one of the four Inns of Court that call students to the bar of England and Wales - were opened to her in 1922.

6. Women in Architecture – The Independent: Sumita Sinha

The first woman admitted to the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) was in 1898 but only after a hotly debated council meeting. Edith Charles was accepted by a vote of 41 for and 16 against. Even then attempts were made to reverse the decision. Morphing to more recent times, in 1985 less than 5% of chartered architects were female. Only in 2000 did the RIBA adopt an equal-opportunities policy.

7. Women in Chartered Accountancy – Royal Holloway, University of London

In 1924, Ethel Watts became the first woman to qualify as a chartered accountant, opening this career path to future generations of women. Not much is known about this pioneering

woman except that she studied at Bedford College in 1913 and was active in the movement to secure equality for women from the 1920s to 1960s.

Watts was involved with the London and National Society for Women's Service, with her main areas of interest being the taxation of married women, the marriage bar in civil service (women were forced to stop working when they married), the issues of superannuation paid by women, and accountancy theory and practice. When this establishment became the Fawcett Society, Watts continued to work as their accountant. The Women Chartered Accountants Dining Society established the Watts prize in her memory.

8. Women Representation in Professions - BBC News 8 March 2012: Mark Easton

Most journalists are women, so too are most teachers, lab technicians, therapists, editors, librarians, public relations officers and insurance underwriters, Mark Easton states. "In fact it is arguable that women now hold a greater proportion of Britain's professional jobs than their representation in the workforce would lead one to expect." Yet these figures are misleading as only 22% of MPs were women when this article appeared with a similar proportion in the Cabinet and serving as judges in the courts. Just 15% of FTSE 100 company directors were women. Muddying the waters for accurate comparison was an enormous difference in full-time and part-time work with males predominately in the former. Women made up 45% of the country's GPs, a similar figure to those in the legal profession. It was a similar story with scientists of whom 46% were women.

9. Women in Public Life, Professions and Boardroom: House of Commons Library

Switching to today, w over thirty years later, a Briefing Paper from the House of Commons (No: SN5170 – 24 February 2017) reveals only moderate progress. The summary states that in very few sectors examined do women exceed the 51% of the UK population they comprise. The table shown in the paper is split into categories of Parliament, boards of public bodies, senior civil service, GPs & NHS consultants, education and FTSE 100 directors. Only GPs exceed 50% representation with the median in other professions around 35%.

The briefing paper then produces more detailed statistics for each category but without comment. The question then arises are current trends simply symptomatic of market forces or might other factors affect this. Time off to raise a family and equal pay are two aspects but the impression is that deeper reasons may still exist whilst acknowledging the general trend of female representation continues upwards.

Stuart Sherring

stuart@ideascafe.co.uk

28 May 2017