

The Opening of Higher Education to Women in Nineteenth Century England: ‘Unexpected Revolution’ or Inevitable Change?

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Abstract

The nineteenth century movement to open higher education to women in England has been the subject of much scholarship in the last two decades. Studies of individual colleges have added to the corpus of research on how women were provided with formal higher education at this time. However, scholars offer differing theories as to why radical changes in the higher education of women took place when they did. This paper offers a synthesis of these various theories, and challenges the general perception that the opening of higher education to women was an ‘unexpected revolution’ (Bryant, 1987).

Introduction

Scholars generally agree that reform in women’s higher education ‘began almost abruptly in the late 1840s and . . . gathered momentum in the 1850s and 1860s’ (Purvis, 1991, p. 73). Williams (1987) supported this view, commenting on the ‘remarkably short period’ over which this branch of higher education was created and established. Typically, scholars have examined contemporaneous evidence, and have focussed on the measurable gains of the time: lectures for women, women’s colleges, formal examinations, and the eventual award of degrees. However, scholarship has not positioned these measurable gains beside educational discourse over several centuries, nor has it recognised the significant amount of informal education provided to English women from at least the late seventeenth century. It has therefore been possible

to see the sudden opening of formal higher education to women as a 'revolution' in ideas and practice.

This paper comments briefly on the theoretical grounds on which scholars have developed the thesis that the opening of higher education for women in England was a form of social revolution. It then suggests that the discrete and differing methodologies by which scholars have arrived at this shared view fail to recognise that historical possibilities at any given time are dependent on what has gone before. Changes that may have seemed swift in implementation and radical in philosophy were well signposted in print culture, in public debate and in private discourse from the late seventeenth century onwards. Both published and manuscript sources point to a sustained interest amongst the middle and upper middle ranks in the subject of female education, and the question of providing colleges for that purpose. The same class and type of people who engaged in debate about the ideal nature of women's education were responsible for the eventual opening of higher education to women. In most instances, they did not see their work as revolutionary; rather, it was perceived as the logical consequence of a tradition of reasoned debate on social and economic change. Those involved in the education reform movement were, I would argue, aware of this tradition.

Historians working in this area have tended to look at periods of educational change, rather than at change agents. As a consequence, the particular role of a few individuals in pioneering higher education for women has been lost in general discourse on the nature of the change itself. As will be seen below, a handful of people involved in the education reform movement in the late nineteenth century were particularly adept at reading the public mind and at developing change in female education that appeared – and was – evolutionary, rather than revolutionary.

Theoretical perspectives on the opening of higher education to women: an overview

A number of publications have examined aspects of the opening of higher education to women in England (see for example Bryant, 1979; Burstyn, 1980; Hunt, 1987; Sutherland, 1987; Rowbotham, 1989; Purvis, 1991 and Raftery, 1997). The period of greatest change was the second half of the nineteenth century, when women began to attend the lectures provided by Mechanics' Institutes and Working Men's Colleges and the university extension classes organised at Manchester, Sheffield, Liverpool and Leeds.

Women's colleges slowly grew in number from the middle of the century. In London, Queen's College was founded in 1848 and Bedford College was founded in 1849. In 1869, the Women's College, Hitchin (later to become Girton College Cambridge) was founded, and Newnham College was established for women in 1871. The 1870s saw much activity in opening university degrees to women: London University admitted women to degrees in 1878, Victoria University opened in 1880, the Scottish universities did so in 1892, and the University of Durham opened its degrees to women in 1895 (see Purvis, 1991; Raftery, 1997).

Purvis (1991), in a discussion of why the education reform movement developed in the second half of the nineteenth century, gives a useful summary of the various explanations offered by scholars. She dismisses the view that 'the demand for improved educational opportunities for women was part of a wider extension of democratic rights and liberty for individuals' (Purvis, 1991, p. 74). Purvis argues that those who benefited from legal and political reform before the middle of the nineteenth century were both middle class and male. Women's legal and political rights 'lagged far behind those for men.' Purvis is equally unconvinced by arguments that industrialization brought increased job opportunities for women, which in turn created a need for female education. While it is recognised that industrialization created many new jobs for women, the expanding female workforce was drawn mainly from the working rather than the middle classes.

Bryant (1979), arguing that the opening up of female education was an 'unexpected revolution', concluded that reform in female education was a consequence of economic change: increasing numbers of poorly educated middle-class women found that they had to support themselves. Changes in the fortunes of middle class women were a consequence of the precarious nature of their fathers' business ventures, and the decline in the rate of middle class marriage, as documented in the Census of 1871. Bryant pointed to the increased public awareness of the problem of 'surplus women' of marriageable age, at a time when numbers of single middle class men were emigrating to the colonies. This, she argued, gave an impetus to the movement for higher education for women. Bryant's explanation is favoured by a number of scholars (see Dyhouse, 1981; Vicinus, 1985; Pederson, 1987; Purvis, 1991).

As early as 1928, Strachey's classic text, *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain*, related the development of higher education for women to the growth generally of the women's movement. This perspective has been shared by a number of scholars

(see Banks, 1981; Rendall, 1985; Levine, 1987; Purvis, 1991). The theoretical perspective that the opening of higher education to women was a consequence of economic necessity and changing marriage patterns is not in conflict with the argument that the formal women's movement was the engine that brought about actual change: it is clear from contemporary sources that members of the organised women's movement were highly conversant with the issue of 'surplus women'. However, the perspectives outlined above suffer from want of a wider frame of reference. They are perspectives that belie the not-unreasonable attempts of scholars to see historical change as a linear process, driven by one – or at best two – main causal engines.

Drawing on Skocpol's theory of multiple causation (Skocpol, 1979), it is possible to demonstrate that the opening of higher education to women is a good example of an historical occurrence that has no one prime cause. It will be seen that the sudden success of the education reform movement was a consequence of what Skocpol would term a 'conjuncture of socio-historical processes' (ibid.). Skocpol views causation as multi-vocal, or polymorphous. This perspective rejects the primacy of economics in historical processes, including so-called social 'revolutions'.

From this perspective, it can be argued that the economic changes which forced a small proportion of all middle class women into the workforce did not 'cause' the gatekeepers of university education to admit women to university privileges and degrees. However, some economic changes provided members of the women's reform movement with useful data with which they could buttress their arguments that women needed degrees and access to the professions. What remains to examine is evidence to suggest that the opening of higher education to women was a conjuncture of socio-historical processes, and not a social revolution. The examination of a longitudinal sample of evidence, representative of change over time, is arguably the most useful method by which to proceed.

'Whether a maid may be a scholar': debates about female reason

In a separate study, a major sample of English print culture which appeared between 1600 and 1900 was examined (Raftery, 1997). The sample included pamphlets, books, periodicals, essays, medical texts, propaganda literature, advice and conduct books, diaries, almanacs, novels, drama and verse. The research clearly indicated that there was

a sustained interest in the question of higher education for English women from at least the late seventeenth century.

Some evidence of interest in formal instruction for women survives from as early as the seventh century. Watson (1912) noted that there are at least seven early books of formal instruction for women written in England or by English writers. These were *De Laudibus Virginitatis* (seventh century), *Exhortation ad Sacra Virgines* (1160), *Ancrene Riwele* (c.1250), *Myroure of our Layde* (fifteenth century), *Garamont of Good Ladies* (c.1500) and a seventh untitled and anonymous work. These books anticipated the genre of conduct books that flourished in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

During the Renaissance, a number of educational works were published which treated the question of female education. Catholic humanists of the circle of Sir Thomas More, Erasmus, Juan Luis Vives and Sir Thomas Elyot carefully considered the content of the curriculum for young women. They recommended that women should receive a classical education, since they would eventually have the responsibility of the education of their children. However, they frequently cited the authority of the Bible in support of their arguments that women should not 'be educated in such a way that their tendency to curiosity shall be developed' (Comenius, *Magna Didactica*, 1657). Eve's role in the expulsion from paradise was the example most frequently cited by scholars in support of the argument that woman had brought evil into the world, and her consequent subjection was the word of God: Eve's words beguiled Adam, and thus woman was debarred from teaching and preaching in public (I Tim 2: ii–xii). This view was central to Vives' influential treatise on female education, *The Instruction of a Christian Woman*, published in 1523. Protestant reformers, such as Thomas Becon and Miles Coverdale, equally showed interest in the appropriate curriculum for young women. They stressed the role women had in the salvation of their children, and argued that women should have a knowledge of the Bible. However, they did not see any public role for women, nor did they envisage that women would pursue learning for its own sake.

Examining works on women's education published at this time, one may reasonably conclude that the influence of the Renaissance milieu was conducive to women's intellectual advancement, but the extent of that advancement was clearly limited. Weisner (1986) has argued that this period allowed women some rational capacity, but it also sharply restricted that capacity. Certainly there was no formal movement at this time to open the male worlds of Arts and Letters to women, but there

was interest in the female mind, appropriate areas of study for women, and the nature of female reason.

Debates about female reason sometimes drew on the theories of female physiology, and occasionally drew on ancient writings. The use of classical *exempla*, and the speculations of Renaissance doctors, brought educational theorists to the conclusion that women had essentially different mental faculties from men (Maclean, 1980). It was possible to justify women's absence from intellectual pursuits on the grounds that they had 'less perfect mental faculties' (ibid., p. 42). They were associated with a privation of meditative powers (*contemplationis defectus*) 'which. . .[made] them, with rustics and the simple-minded, well suited to devoutness, but ill suited to intellectual life' (ibid., p. 64). Despite the contemporary opinion that women were ill-suited to learning, many women became serious scholars. Some chose to publish their own theories of female education, and some men published defences of classical education for women (see Raftery, 1997). It is from this point onwards that we find a sustained interest in widening women's educational sphere, and we find the first arguments in support of college education for women.

A handful of publications that have survived from the seventeenth century demonstrate that formal education for women was a subject for debate. In 1659, *The Learned Maid, or Whether a Maid may be a Scholar*, was published in England. The original text, in Latin, had been penned by the brilliant Dutch scholar Anna Maria van Schurman in 1641. In *The Learned Maid*, van Schurman argued that subjects appropriate for female study included grammar, logic, rhetoric, metaphysics, history and languages. She did not argue that women should be involved in the practice of law, or in oratory at the church, court or university. However, her influence in England was clearly felt through translations of her work and the adoption of her ideas by the Englishwoman, Bathsua Makin. Makin, who knew both van Schurman and Comenius, was employed by Charles I as tutor to the Princess Elizabeth. Indeed, when the Princess later went to live in Holland, she became an intimate friend of van Schurman. In 1673, Bathsua Makin published an important pamphlet, *An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen*, which challenged the contemporary view that women were 'not endued with such reason as men, nor capable of improvement by education' (Makin, 1673). The course of study for women that she designed included the classics and mathematical subjects, and she argued that educated women were of great benefit to their families and to the nation.

The publication of Makin's ideas was followed by what is arguably the first proposal for a college for women in England: *A Letter Concerning a Colledge of Maids* (1675). It was written by Clement Barksdale, the schoolmaster responsible for the English translation of van Schurman's *Learned Maid*. Clearly these early supporters of higher education for women were conversant with each other's work, and shared a concern about the paucity of college education for women. Barksdale's 'colledge' was to be modelled on the Halls of Commoners at Oxford, and was to contain an extensive library and accommodation for twenty women scholars. The scholars were to receive instruction in practical divinity and devotion, history, and both learned and modern languages. Nothing came of his plan, although it may well have influenced a more detailed plan for higher education for women that appeared in 1694: *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest*, by Mary Astell. This publication ran to many editions (Perry, 1986; Raftery, 1997), and caused some controversy. It argued that women's schools should be comparable to men's schools, and that there should be a college, or seminary, founded for the higher education of women. Written in two parts, the *Proposal* linked the cultivation of female intellect with the greater glory of God, and posited that in ignorance lay the root of evil. Evidence indicates that this plan for a women's college was, at one point, to be given support in the form of an anonymous contribution of £10,000. It is thought that the benefactor might have been Princess Anne, to whom Part II of the *Proposal* was dedicated. However, nothing came of the proposal (see Perry, 1986; Raftery, 1997).

Arguments in favour of female education may be traced in a number of seventeenth century publications such as those mentioned above. Despite the fact that these works invariably linked women's education with using one's free time responsibly, and with glorifying God, they were met with some hostility. The existence of a *corpus* of printed works that argued against female education suggests that this period witnessed the start of a formal debate about the appropriate curriculum for women, and the nature of female reason. This debate may be traced in English print sources up to the end of the nineteenth century, at which point the first colleges for women were founded.

Towards a theory of female reason: sources from the long eighteenth century

There is a great richness of sources from the eighteenth century that

indicates the growth in female literacy, the increased interest in the question of female education, and the growth in the number of books published by and for women (see Gardiner, 1929; Cressy, 1980, and Crawford, 1985). Eighteenth century sources also indicate that there emerged at this time a secular ideology of female rationality, which provided the *raison d'être* for women's education (Raftery, 1997, p. 43). Lockean thought proved that the theological basis of the argument for women's inferiority was groundless (*ibid.*), and Locke argued that women should receive a similar education to men.

The eighteenth century witnessed an unprecedented interest in the female condition, and publications addressed all manner of female occupations and concerns. The improved standard of living for the English middle classes resulted in women having more leisure time, and therefore seeking occupation and education. In order to satisfy women's increasing demands for entertainment and education, publishers turned out advice books, conduct literature, magazines, almanacs and 'miscellanies'. Some of this material provided light entertainment, but other works provided informal instruction and self-education to women who were denied access to college education.

Particularly popular were books that promoted women's scientific interests, such as Algarotti's *Sir Isaac Newton's Philosophy explained for the Use of the Ladies* (1790), and Wakefield's *An Introduction to Botany* (1760). Anthologies, diaries and almanacs and miscellanies for women were also popular forms of self-instruction. *The Diarian Miscellany* (1775), *The Young Lady's Parental Monitor* (1790), *The Female Reader* (1798) and the *Female Instructor* (1815) are just a few examples of the hundreds of types of publication that appeared at this time in order to satisfy the demand for general and scientific information and moral instruction.

There was also at this time a significant growth in the market for publications that outlined specific programmes of instruction for women, and an examination of these publications indicates that there was a new awareness of the intellectual capacities of the female sex. In a study of women's scientific interests in the eighteenth century, Phillips (1990, p.1) notes that many prominent women were known for their scientific studies: George Eliot studied Chemistry, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's daughter studied geology and botany, Maria Edgeworth enjoyed astronomy, and both Byron's daughter and Shelley's first wife studied different branches of science. Text books from this period also indicate the growing participation of women in scientific study: *An Introduction to Botany* (1760, and above) reached its eleventh edition by

1741; *Conversations on Chemistry, intended more especially for the female Sex* (2 vols., 1805) reached a sixteenth edition by 1853; and Mary Somerville's *On the Connexion of the Physical Sciences* (1834) was translated into several languages and ran to ten editions over four decades.

Arguably, the most popular genre of literature produced for the rapidly expanding female readership was the conduct book. The most widely read conduct books of the eighteenth century were Dr James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1765), Dr John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1774) and *Advice to a Daughter* (1688) by George Saville, Marquis of Halifax, which was reprinted at least fourteen times throughout the eighteenth century. The content of these books suggests that women's increased interest in learning was the cause of some tension. The writers of popular conduct books invariably advised women that learning was of limited use. It could be advantageous in the rearing of one's children, but equally it could be found unattractive by the opposite sex. Gregory (edn.1790, p. 29) cautioned: '... if you have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from the men, who generally look, with jealous and malignant eye on a woman of great parts, and a cultivated understanding.' His view accorded with that of Rousseau who, in the highly influential educational treatise *Emile*, had stated that the woman's education should be planned 'in relation' to the man's. The views of Rousseau, Fordyce and Gregory were attacked by Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). In the *Vindication* (edn. 1992, p. 144), she argued that 'insuperable obstacles... prevented the cultivation of female understanding, yet virtue can be built on no other foundation'.

One of the 'insuperable obstacles' was that higher education remained firmly closed to women, and this was to remain the case until the late nineteenth century. However, the increased rate of female literacy, the buoyant market for educational books for women, and the vigour with which the 'female education' debate continued in public print, all contributed to creating a set of circumstances in which formal higher education became a possibility.

A climate for change: developments in women's education in the nineteenth century

The debate about female education was energised in the nineteenth century by the growth of the popular periodical. This is a connection which has been overlooked in scholarship, and which merits close analy-

sis. Even a cursory examination of the breadth of interest in the topic of female education indicates that the advent of the popular press was one of the 'socio-cultural processes' that contributed to the opening of higher education to women.

Another process, albeit one which has received considerable attention from scholars, was the changing understanding by medical science of the nature of the female body and, in particular, the functions of the reproductive organs. It is not a coincidence that women began to enjoy greater physical and intellectual liberty at the end of the nineteenth century, when it had finally become clear that menstruation was not a disease (Ryan, 1841) or an illness (Waller, 1839; Jalland and Hooper, 1986). However, for much of the nineteenth century, prominent gynaecologists argued that the intellectual stimulation of the female mind posed a danger to the body, and their ideas reached the middle classes through popular periodicals. Four doctors were prominent in the debate about education for women: Clouston, Maudsley, Playfair and Thorburn. Sir Thomas Clouston was the first Lecturer in Mental Disease at the University of Edinburgh; Maudsley was Professor of Medical Jurisprudence at University College, London; Playfair was Professor of Obstetric Medicine at King's College, London; and Thorburn held a similar post at Manchester. All of these men published widely and wrote medical texts in their fields. Their theories about women's mind and bodies appeared in print sources at exactly the time that the education reform movement was getting underway, and higher education for women was on the agenda.

Medical evidence carried a particular weight, as it was presumed to be based on evidence. Even a cursory glance at some contemporary medical sources suggests that hard evidence was wanting. Thomas Laycock, Professor of Medicine at Edinburgh wrote, in *A Treatise on the Nervous Diseases of Women* (1840, p.140), that 'forced mental training. . .greatly increased the irritability of the brain', and proposed that the cure for this form of hysteria was marriage. Clouston, in *Female Education from a Medical Point of View* (1882, p. 38), wrote:

I have seen girls, the daughters of well-grown parents, who simply stopped growing too soon. They are more or less dwarfish specimens of their kind; this being caused, as I believe, by the vital nervous force being appropriated by the mental part of the brain in learning.

The many diseases that Clouston believed could afflict female scholars included 'anaemia. . .stunted growth. . .nervousness. . .[and] deficient powers of self-control.' He concluded that 'book-knowledge. . .actually

warped woman's nature' concluding that 'it takes much to alter the female type of mind but a few generations of masculine education will go far to make some change' (ibid., p. 45). Clouston's paper doubtless had much influence on the public perception of the danger to women of higher education. It was presented at the Philosophical Institute, Edinburgh in 1891, and was published as a pamphlet the same year. In 1883 and 1884 it was re-printed in the *Popular Science Monthly*, and, as Digby (1989, p. 211) noted, its central arguments were extended to the area of college education in 1884 in a lecture delivered by Thorburn, Professor of Obstetrics at Manchester, just a week after the University of Oxford had opened its doors to women.

Digby (1989, pp. 208–209) suggests that the hostile pronouncements of medical men were 'precisely correlated with specific developments in women's education so as to achieve maximum impact.' The middle and upper-middle class readers of popular periodicals were treated to many articles and essays on the subject of higher education for women at this time. The aforementioned Maudsley, in a controversial article titled 'Sex in Mind' (*Fortnightly Review*, 1874), brought his concerns about the dangers of female education to a wide audience, just as the education reform movement was gaining impetus and the first colleges for women had been founded. Maudsley argued that advanced education for women had pathological effects. His arguments might have seriously damaged the newly created Girls Public Day School Company, and weakened institutions such as Queen's College and Girton College. However a reply to Maudsley by Elizabeth Garrett Anderson MD was published one month later, in which she challenged his evidence, and argued clearly that there were no grounds for denying higher education to women (*Fortnightly Review*, 1874). It is at about this time that we see popular publications increasingly publishing in support of women's education, and a slow acceptance of the overall benefit of colleges for women.

There is ample evidence that popular print culture linked the need for female education with demographic changes and with the issue of 'appropriate' employment for middle-class Englishwomen (Raftery, 1997). A series of articles by writer and reform activist Bessie Rayner Parkes, published in the *English Woman's Journal* between 1859 and 1860, examined the 'market for educated female labour' (Parkes, 1859), and argued that educated women could take up positions in 'hospitals, prisons, reformatories. . .and educational institutions' (see Raftery, 1997, p. 165). In addition, periodicals and journals that appealed to the middle and upper-middle classes, such as the

Contemporary Review, *Blackwood's Magazine* and *Fraser's Magazine*, carried pieces on higher education for women. The topic was clearly the subject for attention. Thomas Markby published his support in the *Contemporary Review* (1868), in a scholarly piece titled 'On the Education of Women'. He referred to the huge increase in the interest in the question of female education, and applauded the success of girls in the Cambridge Local Examinations, which had only just been opened to girls. Emily Davies, founder of Girton College, was also published by the *Contemporary Review*. In 'Some Account of a proposed new College for Women' (1869), Davies drew on the evidence gathered by the Schools Inquiry Commission (1864–66) to support her argument that higher education for women had gained considerable support. Davies pointed out that the commissioners had approved her proposal for a college for women. *Fraser's Magazine* published pieces by the well-known and prolific journalist Frances Power Cobbe, who attacked the practice of exporting 'surplus' women to the colonies and argued that they should be educated to lead full and worthwhile lives in their homeland.

Davies, like her close friend Elizabeth Garrett Anderson MD, drew on hard evidence rather than speculation and sentiment, in making her case for higher education for women. Another contemporary, Dorothea Beale who had founded Cheltenham Ladies College, was equally thorough in amassing empirical detail in support of female education. She edited and published *Reports Issued by the Schools Inquiry Commission on the Education of Girls*, in 1869, bringing the findings of the commissioners to a wider audience and highlighting the necessity for formal higher education for women.

The second half of the nineteenth century saw sustained activity on the part of those who supported the higher education movement. Emily Davies and Frances Power Cobbe addressed the National Association for the Promotion of Social Sciences (NAPSS); the Governesses Benevolent Institution was founded to provide examinations and certification for women teachers in 1844; and a group of King's College men threw their support into founding Queen's College, London in 1847.

A small circle of like-minded individuals was associated with the founding of Queen's College, and in a similar vein it was a cohesive group who petitioned for the opening of the Cambridge Local Examinations to girls, and the founding of Girton College, Cambridge. Communication between these organisations was surprisingly effective, given the almost exclusive reliance on the writing of letters and circulating of petitions. Even a cursory glance at the biographical register of

Emily Davies: Collected Letters (Murphy and Raftery, forthcoming) illustrates that the pioneers of higher education for women were a small network of allies who recognised that the climate for change was right.

Conclusion

This paper has offered an overview of differing theories as to why higher education opened to women in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The paper challenges the general perception that the opening of higher education to women was an ‘unexpected revolution’, and argues that the opening of higher education to women was an historical occurrence that has no one prime cause, but was a ‘conjuncture of socio-historical processes’. Through an examination of print culture, we can see that an on-going debate about higher education for women may be traced in sources for over two centuries, and that there is evidence that public interest in the question dates back at least to the Renaissance. This on-going debate was crucial to the success of the late nineteenth century educational reformers, as the main arguments for and against female education had been well rehearsed. When men and women agitated on behalf of opening the first colleges for women in London and Cambridge, for example, they were able to provide robust responses to their detractors. They were able to respond with well-grounded and logical answers to the criticisms of medical doctors, educational theorists, journalists, clergymen, and concerned parents. Economic necessity had created an environment in which it had become necessary for many middle-class women to be educated for work, and many of the traditional grounds on which women had been denied education had been removed (see Raftery, 1997). However, it was the peculiar and distinct ferment of movement politics, economic and demographic change and the dedication and charisma of a handful of individuals that made higher education for women possible.

Considering the length of time during which female education was debated, it could be said that the opening of higher education to women was achieved remarkably slowly. Far from being ‘unexpected’ or revolutionary, it had been sign-posted and thoroughly discussed.

A century later, we are witnessing a phenomenon which was arguably more ‘unexpected’: that women undergraduates outnumber men in higher education in England (Blackstone, 2001). However, this change does not imply that women attained this position easily, or that their experience of higher education was immediately the same as that of men. For example, although Girton College was founded in 1869,

women were not at that time awarded degrees. The battle for degrees and privileges at Cambridge continued into the next century. While Cambridge opened the degree examinations to women in 1881, it did not confer full university degrees and privileges on women until 1948 (McWilliams-Tullberg, 1975; Delamont, 1996). The college lives of first-generation university women generally compared unfavourably with men's: they were more likely to be sent down for misdemeanours, they were allowed to read a smaller range of subjects, they often had limited library rights, and they led a restricted life (Delamont, 1996). The range of professions open to women who had been to college remained small for these pioneering women: in a separate study it was demonstrated that women graduates who worked after college almost invariably became teachers (Raftery, 1996). At a time when medicine and the law were – *de facto* if not *de jure* – closed to women, teaching was considered to be a genteel profession, which required the 'female' virtues of patience and caring. However, many of the first-generation women graduates were clearly very able individuals. Some had very distinguished careers in education. The first group of women to read for the Tripos at Girton College were particularly successful: Louisa Lumsden became first Headmistress of St Leonard's School at St Andrew's (1877–82) and was awarded the D.B.E. in 1925; Jane Frances Dove became first Headmistress of Wycombe Abbey School (1896–1910), and Constance Maynard co-founded and became first Mistress of Westfield College (1882). Many others taught in less prominent schools and many went overseas as missionaries. Few, however, were welcomed into academia. A pattern was established whereby women graduates favoured 'female' professions, and rarely pursued further study. This paper, then, may provide scholars interested in gender imbalance in higher education with a useful historical perspective, signalling the origins of the gender differences in higher education as explored in recent studies (see for example Delamont, 1996).

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