This is a collection of portraits of twelve outstanding women who lived and worked in Cambridge during the century before women were admitted fully to membership of the University.

The subjects include Jane Harrison, distinguished scholar of Greek religion, Mrs Sidgwick, founder of Newnham College, Eileen Power, medieval historian, Nora Chadwick, scholar of Norse and Celtic, Honor Fell, cell biologist and driving force behind the Strangeways Laboratory, Frances Cornford, poet, and Rosalind Franklin, whose work on DNA was essential to the Watson–Crick model. All were outstanding personalities as well as distinguished scholars, and the ‘twelve portraits’ give a vivid account of their lives and work. The book does not, however, fly a feminist banner or seek feminist scapegoats.
CAMBRIDGE

WOMEN

TWELVE

PORTRAITS

EDITED BY

EDWARD SHILS

AND

CARMEN BLACKER
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PREFACE

Here are portraits of twelve remarkable women. All of them lived and worked in Cambridge during the century after women’s education became established there in the early 1870s. All of them did their best work in the days before women were formally allowed to take the degrees which their examination results had deserved. The fact that they were not acknowledged as members of the University in no way dampened their passion for knowledge, their intellectual distinction and their powers of original and creative thinking.

Cambridge was in fact the last university in the British Isles to admit women to full membership. It took one world war to persuade Oxford to give degrees to women in 1921. It took two world wars to persuade Cambridge to do likewise, for it was not until 1947 that the proposal to admit women to the same degrees as men was passed without a division or a murmur of dissent.

Before 1947 two brave attempts were made to secure recognition for the academic attainments of the women students of Girton and Newnham Colleges. These two colleges, founded in the early 1870s, had within a decade, thanks to the courageous efforts of Professor Henry Sidgwick, Mrs Eleanor Sidgwick, Miss Emily Davies and a few other far-sighted pioneers, put up their first buildings in the Cambridge area. Permission was granted to the modest numbers of their students to attend lectures, heavily
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chaperoned, and to sit for the same examinations, assessed on the same standards, as were set for men undergraduates.

They were, however, in no way recognised as members of the University. They were not awarded degrees, nor could they be given any kind of University office. Stringent rules hemmed in their social lives.

The first attempt, to secure the modest recognition of mere ‘titles of degrees’, was made in May 1897. ‘Titular degrees’ meant no more than degrees in name, with no substance or reality behind the name, and no membership of the University. But even so unambitious a measure in 1897 roused extraordinary passions on both sides. In the camp hostile to women it was alleged that women were dowy swotters, firmly in the middle second class, but at the same time silly and frivolous, and likely to undermine the education of men.

It was a long time, The Times noted shortly before the vote took place, since the Universities had been ‘agitated by a controversy so acute and bitter as that now raging in Cambridge over the question of degrees for women’. For weeks beforehand a committee, composed of MPs, QC’s, FRS’s, archdeacons and earls, had worked tirelessly to mobilise support against the women. A special train was engaged to carry non-resident MAs from King’s Cross to Cambridge to register their votes against the women’s cause. Free lunches were offered in colleges for those ready to vote non-placet.

Among the undergraduates even fiercer hostility was fomented against degrees for women. They plastered Cambridge with posters in huge red letters proclaiming ‘Down with Women’s Degrees’ and ‘Beware the Thin End of the Wedge’. They organised a debate in the Union on the motion ‘That this meeting strongly condemns the recommendations of the Women’s Degrees Syndicate’. It was carried by a huge majority.

On 21 May the special train arrived crowded to capacity with
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non-resident MAs, mostly clergymen. When voting started in the Senate House, a huge crowd of yelling undergraduates gathered in the street outside the railings, while a hideous dummy of a woman in ‘rational dress’ dangled from the window of the shop which is now the University Press Bookshop. As the voting got under way, the crowd began to pelt the MAs on the Senate House lawn with eggs, dirty flour and lighted fireworks. When the result of the vote was announced, that the women had lost by more than a thousand votes, there was a rush of furiously cheering undergraduates to Newnham. Had not Mrs Sidgwick had the presence of mind to close the iron gates, considerable damage might have been inflicted on college property.

The next attempt to secure the admission of women to degrees, and to membership of the University, was not made until 1920. Already Oxford had chosen to open its doors. But in Cambridge the arguments adduced against admitting women were much the same as in 1897. It was the ‘thin end of the wedge’. Women were out for power, not for education or intellectual training. They meant to rule, not to rest content with mere equality. They were boring swotters, always first into the lecture halls, closely followed by ‘gangs of Indians’. But at the same time they were frivolous and addicted to dancing, and would exert feminine wiles to lure examiners into giving them unfair advantages over men. They would contribute more to the general good by darning stockings, or helping ‘at home’ in a valetudinarian father’s vicarage, than in discussing the binomial theorem.

Again, as in 1897, the undergraduates outdid their seniors in their ferocious hostility to ‘the women’. And when, as twenty-three years before, ‘the women’ were defeated, they again made a furious rush to Newnham. This time they managed to smash the iron gates, though no further damage inside the College was perpetrated, and no attacks on persons. A fund was later set up to pay for the damage.

Though still denied full membership of the University,
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and still debarred from taking the degrees they had earned in their examinations, women were at last, in 1922, admitted to the ‘titles of degrees’. They were not allowed to wear gowns, let alone go before the Vice-Chancellor to receive his Latin blessing of admission to a degree. Their lives were still compassed about by a body of rules of fatuous prudery. But in listening to lectures, though always on the lecturer’s sufferance, in writing essays, in expanding their intellectual vision through contact with dedicated teachers, their opportunities were apparently hardly less rich and promising than were those of full members of the University.

Soon after the Second World War, when the issue was again presented for a vote, the grace was passed without a single dissentient voice. ‘A slight tremor’ in the waiting crowd was the sole reaction that one witness observed. The issue which on two previous occasions had been rejected with yells, cheers and near rioting, was now passed without a murmur. The Queen (Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother) was the first woman to receive a degree from Cambridge, honoris causa, in 1948.

The twelve women in this book were all working against such a background. Their dedication to learning, their intellectual integrity, their refusal to waste precious opportunities in political lobbying, seem today all the more remarkable. They rose above the inveterate stereotype of the bluestocking, which clung to them with the limpet-like obstinacy of a folk-tale motif.

Eleanor Sidgwick was one of the founders of Newnham College, a mathematician of distinction in her own right, and second in the line of Principals whose administrative skills have guided the growth and development of the College. Helen Fowler describes her unique personality, powerful, yet remote, and her ‘working partnership’ with her husband, Professor Henry Sidgwick, in the inception both of the new college for women, and of the Society for Psychical Research, which was bold enough to try to study
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scientifically those intrusive phenomena in life which elude scientific explanation.

Jane Harrison’s work on Greek ritual and religion helped to initiate a new era in classical studies in England. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, in a notable study which we believe will set a number of recent misconceptions to rights, fully endorses Gilbert Murray’s remark that nobody can write about Greek religion, even today, without being influenced by her work.

Mary Paley Marshall was an early exponent of economics, whose literary style remained nevertheless so unpolluted by jargon that her short book of reminiscences, What I Remember, gives us a fascinating glimpse of Cambridge in the early part of the century. We asked Professor Sir Austin Robinson to write about her. ‘You won’t get anything better than what Keynes did in 1944, and certainly not from me,’ he replied. We offer therefore what seems one of Keynes’s most sparkling Essays in Biography.

Helen Cam’s work as a medieval historian, on the Hundred Rolls of Cambridgeshire and Suffolk, on Assize Rolls and monastic cartularies, on the survey of the city of Cambridge which appears in the Victoria County History, kept her an honoured figure in Girton for twenty-seven years. As Janet Sondheimer describes in her portrait of this austere, dedicated and kindly scholar, she was the first woman to be appointed to a University Lectureship in History, and the first woman to earn the distinction of a ‘title’ to a Litt.D. degree in 1937. The hollow titular degree was substantiated in 1947 to the reality of a scarlet gown.

Marjory Stephenson’s work on bacterial biochemistry earned her the distinction of being one of the first two women to be elected Fellows of the Royal Society in 1945. Joan Mason shows how, before 1929, a woman could be debarred from being a Fellow of such a body because she was not a ‘legal person’. And how, despite the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919, and despite her work on enzymes and bacterial metabolism which would have earned her earlier election had she been a man, it was
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only in 1945 that a sympathetic lobby of FRSEs procured her election, with Kathleen Lonsdale.

Frances Cornford is the only one of our dozen women with no formal affiliation with either University or college. But Helen Fowler shows us in a vivid portrait that she was always an important honorary member, at the centre of a network of influential minds, how her poetry grew from Cambridge soil and how for many it still expresses the essence of the Cambridge scene.

Eileen Power is still remembered outside the circle of medieval historians for her Medieval People and her Medieval English Nunneries. Maxine Berg reveals her as one of the first women scholars to break out of the older mould of single-mindedly dedicated dons into a newer generation which took for granted a wider perspective in university life. With what have been called her ‘graceful and penetrating studies’, she helped to build a tradition of social and economic history hitherto lacking in the historian’s purview.

Nora Chadwick is vividly recalled, and her notable scholarship in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic assessed, by Hilda Davidson, for many years her pupil and friend. A remarkable and inspiring personality, she refused to confine herself to these exacting disciplines, and in another ‘working partnership’ with her husband, Professor Hector Chadwick, broadened her scope so far as to write a substantial part of the monumental work in three volumes, The Growth of Literature. I recall her telling me that while she was absorbed in writing this great work she did not go out for a meal for twenty-five years.

Enid Welsford, whose diminutive figure and fiery energy are still recalled by many with affection and nostalgia, is here brought to life again by Elsie Duncan-Jones, who again, as pupil and friend, knew her intimately for many years. Her notable studies of The Fool and The Court Masque are landmarks in the early years of ‘English’ studies in Cambridge. (The Tripos in English was not
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fully completed, it should be remembered, until 1926.) Her brilliant teaching, in which she excitingly conveyed to her pupils the literary issues of the day in sessions which occasionally continued until midnight, made her the kind of character round whom anecdotes, and later legends, cling and evolve.

Audrey Richards was one of Malinowski’s first pupils, and went to Rhodesia in 1930 to put his principles of anthropology into practice in her studies of the Bemba tribe. The first anthropologists had scarcely moved from their studies and libraries, relying for their material on the descriptions of earlier travellers to the scene. Malinowski decreed that anthropologists should live among the people they were investigating, eat their food, learn their language. Audrey Richards was the first woman to carry out these instructions in the ‘queer mix-up’ of people whom she found in what is now northern Zambia. Adam Kuper assesses her contribution to functionalist anthropology, her memorable personality, and her stout denials that she had ever encountered difficulties on account of her sex.

Honor Fell was a pioneer in cell biology and tissue culture, and the driving force behind the Strangeways Research Laboratory in Cambridge. The Strangeways was a place where people from thirty-two countries came to learn about organ culture, and Joan Mason shows how her unique combination of gifts, administrative, scientific and imaginative, was responsible for its success as a research institute. She too was elected an FRS relatively late in life, at the age of 52, and after some labour pains.

Finally Rosalind Franklin is here portrayed by her sister Jenifer Glyn in a memorable recollection. Her work on DNA has been given only late recognition, but as Sir Aaron Klug recalled, ‘her work provided ingredients vital to the discovery of the Watson–Crick model of DNA, and vital to the concepts of structural molecular theory’. Her early death cut short a brilliant career.

These women deserve commemoration, and it is good that
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Edward Shils conceived the idea of commemorating them in this book. They are examples of many more remarkable women, who in an ideal dimension of space and time should also have been included.

March 1995, Cambridge

CARMEN BLACKER

Note

I have relied chiefly on Rita McWilliams-Tullberg, *Women at Cambridge: a Men's University though of a Mixed Type* (London 1975); Christopher N. L. Brooke, *A History of the University of Cambridge*, vol. iv: *1870–1990* (Cambridge 1993); Anne Phillips (ed.), *A Newnham Anthology* (Cambridge 1979); Gordon Johnson, *University Politics: F. M. Cornford's Cambridge and his Advice to the Young Academic Politician* (Cambridge 1994); Gillian Sutherland, ‘Emily Davies, the Sidgwicks and the Education of Women in Cambridge’, in *Cambridge Minds*, ed. Richard Mason (Cambridge 1994). I am grateful too to Dr Elisabeth Leedham-Green, University Archivist, for permission to consult the file on the education of women, and to Kate Perry and Carola Hicks, Archivists to Girton and Newnham Colleges, for generous help.

Postscript

As Edward Shils describes in his Introduction, the idea of a book on Cambridge women was originally his. It was a project dear to his heart during the last two years of his life, and on his visits to Cambridge from Chicago he would spend much time and energy, and green ink, in discussing its progress. It is with very deep regret therefore that we have to record his death in January 1995, before he could see the tangible results of his idea in the published book. But *Cambridge Women* may be accounted his last edited work, and a worthy successor to his own *Tradition, Center and Periphery*, and *Intellectuals and their Powers*. To all these books, and to the
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journal Minerva which he edited for thirty years, he brought to bear his unique intellectual gifts of total recall, pungent wit, large capacity for friendship, resolute dismissal of bogusness, and unwillingness to tolerate vapid academic fashions. That he accounted feminism in its fanatical form among such fashions may be inferred from the fact that readers will search in vain in this book for references to gendered types, female figurations and androcentric premises.

C.B.