CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-01531-8 - Girton College 1869-1932
Barbara Stephen
Excerpt
More information

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Different origins of men's and women's colleges. Women in the nineteenth century. The women's movement and its founders. The founders of Girton. First steps towards higher education.

THE WOMEN'S COLLEGES at the older Universities are now so well established as to be taken for granted as a necessary part of the national system of education. Their character and aims are so far similar to those of the men's Colleges as to obscure at first sight the fact that they are totally different in origin and history. These differences of course leap to the eye so far as the buildings are concerned; and they must be explained if we are to understand their present character and position.

When Girton College was founded in 1869, the University of Cambridge was still in the midst of that remarkable process of change which was to transform its character in the course of the nineteenth century. With five hundred years of life behind it, it was entering upon a fresh chapter and renewing its vitality, after the stagnant period of the eighteenth century, with its sinecures and its narrow exclusiveness.

The origins of the University can be traced back to the thirteenth century; many of the Colleges date from the Middle Ages, and most of them had come into existence before the Reformation. Their main object in the first instance was to encourage learning,

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-01531-8 - Girton College 1869-1932
Barbara Stephen
Excerpt
More information

for the advancement of knowledge, and with a view to preparing men for the learned professions, especially for teaching and for the priesthood. At a time when the wealthier classes were hardly expected to be literate, it was natural that the students should be drawn from among the poorer classes, and we find that King's College, to take but one instance, was founded by Henry VI for poor scholars who intended to take Holy Orders. Among the wealthier classes there were men and women of enlightened public spirit, kings and queens and princes of the Church, by whose initiative the Colleges were founded. From such beginnings the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge were gradually developed through the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Civil Wars, and all the vicissitudes of English history. Till well on in the nineteenth century they retained their close connection with the Church. Dissenters were not admitted to degrees or to Fellowships. The abolition of religious tests was only carried, after a long agitation, in 1871; and the medieval prohibition of the marriage of Fellows was not withdrawn at Cambridge till 1882. These events formed part of the process by which profound changes were brought about in the Universities, partly by a movement from within, partly by Royal Commissions and Acts of Parliament. By the end of the nineteenth century they were freed from ecclesiastical control, and had become the keystone of the national system of education which had meanwhile been built up. They were regarded not only as leading to the learned professions, but as a

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-01531-8 - Girton College 1869-1932
Barbara Stephen
Excerpt
More information

normal means, open to young men of all classes and creeds, of preparation for life in general. And with the modern developments of both natural sciences and humane learning, their function of advancing knowledge became of immense value and importance to a far wider circle of students than ever before.

It was during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, when the Universities were in the thick of this movement, that the women's Colleges were founded. Public opinion was at this time overwhelmingly against the admission of women, not only to the priesthood, but to any of the learned professions. The sole exception—the teaching profession—could not be called learned where women were concerned, as women teachers were in general quite unqualified for their work. The condition and status of women have undergone a revolution during the last sixty years—a revolution in which the women's Colleges have been a powerful though silent force; and the problems which confronted the founders of these Colleges cannot be understood without some reference to the condition of women previous to their foundation.

Such progress as was made in national development during the earlier part of the nineteenth century hardly touched women. The enlargement of the franchise affected them not at all; the same may be said of the growth of education. The freedom of movement made possible to men by improved means of communication and the more complete establishment of law and order was denied to women by

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge
Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-01531-8 - Girton College 1869-1932
Barbara Stephen
Excerpt
More information

custom and tradition; and the developments in trade and industry altered their position only for the worse.[1] While men were advancing, women were standing still—not only standing still, but losing ground. And so it came about that the principal founders of Girton, Emily Davies and Barbara Leigh Smith (Madame Bodichon), were born into a world in which women were generally regarded as hopelessly and by nature inferior to men in intellectual powers as well as in physical strength. There were, of course, notable exceptions; but by the average Englishman the inferiority of "the weaker sex" was taken for granted.

Barbara Leigh Smith, the elder of these two founders, came from a family with strongly progressive traditions, both political and religious. Florence Nightingale was her cousin and contemporary, George Eliot one of her most intimate friends. An unconventional father allowed her to have a good education and a very unusual degree of personal independence, and her gifts of character enabled her to make the fullest use of these advantages. Independent, original, enthusiastic, and generous to a fault, she was full of schemes to reform the world, but she was no unpractical visionary; and her strong cheerful common sense, her wide interests, and her many friends, all helped her to attract support to the unpopular cause of women's education and women's rights. Through her initiative a group was formed of men and women, middle-class Victorians, who were thoughtful enough

[1] This was true of the middle classes, no less than of the wage-earners. See *Emily Davies and Girton College*, Chapter 1.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge
Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-01531-8 - Girton College 1869-1932
Barbara Stephen
Excerpt
More information

to see that one of the great needs of their time was the removal of the restrictions which forbade women to receive any education worthy of the name, or to take any active part in the life of their country, not only in politics but even in philanthropy. This group were the pioneers of the modern women's movement.

The movement for the education of women sprang directly from the movement for emancipation generally. In 1856 Miss Leigh Smith, with her friend Miss Parkes (afterwards Madame Belloc), started the first agitation for the reform of the Married Women's Property laws; and in 1858 they established the *Englishwoman's Journal*, the first organ of the women's movement, which led immediately to the foundation of the Society for the Employment of Women. The *Journal* and the Society formed a nucleus from which the many activities of the women's movement grew with extraordinary vigour. It was at once recognized that education was a necessary preliminary to work; women were not employed even in drapers' shops, because they had so little knowledge of arithmetic; and the state of mind of milliners' assistants may be guessed from the notice seen by Charles Dickens in a milliner's window: "Wonted, a feamail Prentis with a Premum".[1] A book-keeping class was started, which grew into a day school; and other developments quickly followed, with profound and far-reaching results. It was at this juncture that a friendship was formed between Miss Emily Davies and

[1] *Letters of Charles Dickens to the Baroness Burdett-Coutts* (John Murray, 1931).

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-01531-8 - Girton College 1869-1932
Barbara Stephen
Excerpt
More information

Madame Bodichon, as Miss Leigh Smith had become in 1857, through her marriage to Dr Bodichon of Algiers. Miss Davies was quickly drawn by her new friend into the feminist movement, which all her natural sympathies went forth to meet.

Emily Davies, who was to be the leader of the group which founded Girton, was a woman of remarkable character. She had an inward fire and vision hidden under a carefully conventional exterior. "Her dainty little figure and smiling face", wrote Mrs Townshend, one of the first Girton students, "were most misleading. They concealed untiring energy, a will of iron, and a very clear and definite set of opinions....She was a person of single aim who looked neither to the right hand nor to the left." In all that concerned women, she was a revolutionary; in all else a conservative. And herein lay a great part of her strength, for she was never led to affront the conventions of her time by mere pleasure in affronting conventions. At the same time, she was so fearless and enterprising and far-sighted as to lead the adventure of founding a College for women in connection with one of the older Universities, an adventure which to most of her contemporaries must have seemed, if they were sympathetic, a forlorn hope; if otherwise, a wild-goose chase, or worse. She had the greatness of mind which gave her the vision, the ideal to aim at; she also had the smallness of mind which enabled her to work untiringly at details, in fact to revel in them. Many of her contemporaries saw her as a narrow-minded woman absorbed in these

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-01531-8 - Girton College 1869-1932
Barbara Stephen
Excerpt
More information

details, and devoted to the unpopular and apparently hopeless task of securing for women admission to the education intended for men. But she was able to gather round her a body of enthusiastic helpers, and eventually to achieve success.

Miss Davies was born a feminist, but her girlhood was passed in surroundings which gave little encouragement to her aspirations. She was the daughter of the Rev. John Davies, Rector of Gateshead from 1839 till 1861. She received the usual education of daughters in those days; that is to say, she was taught almost entirely at home, by her mother and elder sister, with the important addition of "Themes" written once a week for her father, which developed her remarkable power of expressing herself clearly and with force. Through Madame Bodichon, whose acquaintance she made in 1858, she came to know the newly formed band of workers for the women's movement. While living at Gateshead, she could do little to further the cause; but she urged and inspired her friend Miss Elizabeth Garrett (afterwards Mrs Garrett Anderson)[1] to make the attempt to enter the medical profession. With the advice and help of Miss Davies, who came to live in London on her father's death in 1861, Miss Garrett applied in the following year for leave to matriculate at London University. This was refused, and Miss Garrett proceeded on other lines; but Miss Davies determined that University education must be opened to women, and devoted herself thenceforward to working for this object.

[1] See Biographical Index.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge
Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-01531-8 - Girton College 1869-1932
Barbara Stephen
Excerpt
More information

A suggestion made at this point by Mr Shaen,[1] of London University, proved fruitful in results, namely, that if something could be got from the older Universities, London might be more likely to prove amenable. The Senior and Junior Local Examinations, established for boys' schools some years previously by the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, seemed likely to meet the case, as nothing was involved in the way of residence. In October, 1862, a Committee was formed to work for the admission of girls to these examinations. Miss Davies was Secretary, and the other members included Madame Bodichon, Mr Tomkinson, Lady Goldsmid, Mr Heywood, and Mrs Manning, all of whom afterwards took part in the foundation of Girton. Mr Tomkinson was a specially useful ally. Shrewd and humorous, and a very able business man, he was Managing Director of the Sun Insurance Office, and a person of great importance in the insurance world generally. As Bursar of Marlborough he had saved the school from financial disaster and laid the foundations of its prosperity. He had had a very distinguished career at Cambridge; he rowed in the Cambridge eight in 1852, played in the University eleven, and was a Wrangler in 1853. Most fortunately he was in 1862 Secretary for the London centre of the Cambridge Local Examinations for boys. With all these qualifications, he was of course invaluable to the Committee in the delicate task of approaching the Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. They would hardly

[1] See Biographical Index.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-01531-8 - Girton College 1869-1932
Barbara Stephen
Excerpt
More information

be likely to listen to a Committee consisting chiefly of ladies, and bringing forward such very novel proposals, but to Mr Tomkinson they did listen. Leave was obtained for an experimental examination to be held for girls; after much anxiety and agitation, ninety-one candidates were induced to enter, all difficulties were overcome, and the examination passed off without a hitch of any kind, Mr Tomkinson afterwards reporting that "there is no ground whatever for the notion that girls are unfit to take part in these examinations". The results threw a flood of light on the poor quality of the teaching in girls' schools, and the need for the examinations became very apparent. A memorial was now organized to the University of Cambridge, and again, after much hard work and anxiety, success was attained. On March 8th, 1865, the Senate passed, by a majority of four, a Grace admitting girls to the Local Examinations. This made the first contact between women's education and the Universities.

Meanwhile the way was opening for a step of even greater importance. In 1864 the Government appointed the celebrated Schools Enquiry Commission to conduct an exhaustive enquiry into "the whole subject of middle-class education". Miss Davies perceived that this offered a golden opportunity, but she quickly found, to her indignation and disappointment, that "the whole subject of middle-class education" was not going to include the education of girls. She at once organized an attack in the shape of a memorial to the Commissioners, which was

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge
Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-01531-8 - Girton College 1869-1932
Barbara Stephen
Excerpt
More information

successful in its object. Girls were to be included; and women would for the first time in history be called as witnesses before a Royal Commission. Evidence was given by Miss Davies and some others, including the great pioneer headmistresses, Miss Buss, of the North London Collegiate School for Girls, and Miss Beale, of Cheltenham Ladies' College. The Secretary to the Commission, Mr Roby, and an Assistant Commissioner, Mr James Bryce (afterwards Lord Bryce), became great allies of Miss Davies, and later took part in the foundation of Girton. The Commission's Report on girls' education was most fruitful and far-reaching in its results, supplying a powerful stimulus to the movement which brought about the great reformation in girls' schools, without which the work of the women's Colleges could not have been accomplished.

The Schools Enquiry Commission brought Miss Davies into contact with a number of schoolmistresses, who, she found, had been working in isolation, and were anxious for opportunities of co-operation and exchange of ideas with other women teachers. The London Schoolmistresses' Association was organized to meet their needs; among its first members were Miss Buss, Miss Chessar, Miss Manning and Miss Metcalfe—all to be later connected with Girton. The stimulus and encouragement given by this Association was something quite new to women teachers. Miss Davies soon found that what they desired above all things was "something to work up to". An external aim, a goal to achieve, were needed if girls'

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org