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Tracing the Contours of the History of Higher Education for Women in Ireland: Competing Discourses and Dominant Themes

Tracer les contours de l'histoire de l'enseignement supérieur pour les femmes en Irlande : discours concurrents et thèmes dominants

Trazando los contornos de la historia de la educación superior de las mujeres en Irlanda: Discursos en conflicto y temas dominantes

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Article abstract

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Tracing the Contours of the History of Higher Education for Women in Ireland: Competing Discourses and Dominant Themes

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Abstract

Women in Ireland, like women across Western societies more broadly, were excluded from attending university until the late nineteenth century, their eventual entry frequently accompanied by sophisticated control frameworks constructed in order to minimise their impact and safeguard the male, middle-class hegemony. This paper traces the dominant themes and competing discourses which shaped the debate surrounding the opening of university education to women in Ireland, mapping the evolution of this process according to three discreet yet inter-related phases: Accommodation vs. Transformation; Special Treatment vs. Equal Treatment; and Access without Equality.

Keywords: women, history of education, Ireland, university

Trazando los contornos de la historia de la educación superior de las mujeres en Irlanda: Discursos en conflicto y temas dominantes

Resumen

Las mujeres en Irlanda, al igual que sucede en general con las mujeres de las sociedades occidentales, hasta finales del siglo XIX no podían asistir a la universidad, y su ingreso más adelante estuvo frecuentemente acompañado de sofisticados marcos de control contruidos para minimizar su impacto y salvaguardar la hegemonía masculina de la clase media. Este artículo rastrea las temáticas dominantes y los discursos competentes que dieron forma al debate en torno a la apertura de la educación universitaria a las mujeres en Irlanda, mapeando la evolución de este proceso según tres fases diferentes pero interrelacionadas: adaptación frente a transformación; trato especial frente a trato igualitario; y acceso sin igualdad.

Palabras clave: mujeres, historia de la educación, Irlanda, universidad

Tracer les contours de l'histoire de l'enseignement supérieur pour les femmes en Irlande : Discours concurrents et thèmes dominants

Résumé

Les femmes en Irlande, tout comme celles des sociétés occidentales en général, ont été exclues des universités jusqu'à la fin du XIXe siècle, leur entrée éventuelle s'étant souvent accompagnée de contrôles sophistiqués ayant pour but de minimiser leur impact et de sauvegarder l'hégémonie masculine de la classe moyenne. Cet article retrace les thèmes majeurs et les discours concurrents qui ont façonné le débat lié à la tentative de permettre l'enseignement universitaire aux femmes en Irlande, cartographiant l'évolution de ce processus selon trois phases distinctes mais interdépendantes : accommodement contre transformation ; traitement spécial contre traitement égal ; et accès sans égalité.

Mots clés : femmes, histoire de l'éducation, Irlande, université

The “Irish University Question”

Settlement of what was euphemistically called “the Irish university question” dominated the Irish political agenda from the 1850s. The complexity of the question lay in the provision of an acceptable university infrastructure for the expanding Catholic middle classes, without promoting a denominational policy agenda. As Moody and Beckett note, “the modern university question in Ireland had its beginnings, during the latter part of the eighteenth century, in efforts to obtain a higher education for those to whom Trinity College was closed.”¹ Trinity College Dublin, the sole constituent college of the University of Dublin, had been founded in 1592 as part of the Tudor monarchy’s policy of Anglicisation and religious reformation. Various attempts, the majority of which led to little success, were made over the course of the century to reach a compromise on the university question. However, efforts intensified throughout the latter half of the century, the issue of providing university education for Catholics becoming more pressing. As one member of the Catholic hierarchy observed, “the political centre of gravity in Ireland has shifted towards the Catholics . . . It is a dangerous thing to have them uneducated.”² Yet despite the highly charged nature of the university question, the subject of women’s place within any university settlement received derisory attention. The issue of providing for a more egalitarian model of university education was narrowly understood in terms of denominational equality for males. To quote Francis Sheehy Skeffington, prominent suffragist and nationalist, “in all the history of the Irish University Question, it is astonishing how little attention has been given to that aspect of it which concerns the position of University Women, and how generally it is assumed that the matter is one for discussion and settlement by men only.”³

Knowing Their Place: Women Activists Seek Accommodation over Transformation

In Ireland, as indeed internationally, those advocating for access for women to universities began to agitate from the mid-nineteenth century. While access to higher education was their ultimate goal, they recognised the need to reform second-level education in the first instance. In reality, the reform of second-level education ran in parallel with the reform of higher education, the wider education reform movement

¹ T.W. Moody and J.C. Beckett, *Queen’s Belfast, 1845-1949: The History of a University* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), xxxvii.

² Evidence of Rev. Dr. O’ Dwyer to the Royal Commission on University Education in Ireland, 1902, Appendix to First Report, Minutes of Evidence, 22.

³ Francis Sheehy Skeffington, *A Forgotten Aspect of the University Question* (Dublin: Gerrard Bros, 1901), 5.

accompanying a number of other campaigns which sought to improve the social, economic and political status of women.⁴

Shut out of universities until the latter half of the nineteenth century, women (often with the help of some progressive men) founded women's colleges from the mid-nineteenth century in order to challenge the doxa,⁵ regarding the appropriate education and roles for women in society and in the economy.⁶ In the Irish context, these emerged in urban, Protestant quarters and were significantly influenced by the movement for the higher education of women in England.⁷ Two of the most successful women's colleges were the Ladies' Collegiate School, Belfast (1859), later Victoria College (1887) and Alexandra College Dublin (1866). Under the leadership of Margaret Byers (1832-1912) and Anne Jellicoe (1823-1880), these schools promoted the study of a rigorous academic curriculum, in an effort to bring the education of females in line with that of males. They also stressed the importance of participation in the public examination arena, success in which meant the acquisition of valuable cultural capital which could in turn be transferred to the field of employment.⁸ The establishment of schools for girls which promoted rigorous application to study and participation in public examinations was, at this time, a radical departure. Margaret Byers noted in a statement to the Endowed Schools Commission that the Ladies' Collegiate School was initially anathema to the majority of parents who considered it "injurious to morals and to manners."⁹ She further observed with respect to the initial months of the School's involvement in the

⁴ Richard Evans, *The Feminists, Women's Emancipation Movements in Europe, America and Australasia, 1840–1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1977); Rosemary Cullen Owens, *A Social History of Women in Ireland, 1870-1970* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2005). Myrtle Hill, *Women in Ireland: A Century of Change* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2003).

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une Théorie de la Pratique* (Geneva : Librairie Droz, 1972).

⁶ James Albisetti, "Un-learned Lessons from the New World? English Views of American Coeducation and Women's Colleges, c.1865–1910," *History of Education*, 29, no. 5 (2000), 473-489; Judith Harford, "The Movement for the Higher Education of Women in Ireland: Gender Equality or Denominational Rivalry?" *History of Education* 34, no. 5 (2005), 473–492; Judith Harford, "An Experiment in the Development of Social Networks for Women: Women's Colleges in Ireland in the Nineteenth Century," *Paedagogica Historica* 43, no. 3 (2007): 365–381; HL Horowitz, *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women's Colleges from Their Nineteenth Century Beginnings to the 1930s* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993); Maria Tamboukou, "Of Other Spaces: Women's Colleges at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century in the UK," *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 7, no. 3 (2000): 247-263; Margaret Vickery, *Buildings for Bluestockings: The Architecture Social History of Women's Colleges Late Victorian England* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999); Sarah Wiggins, "Gendered Spaces and Political Identity: Debating Societies in English Women's Colleges, 1890–1914," *Women's History Review* 18, no. 5 (2009), 737-752.

⁷ Judith Harford, "Women and the Irish University Question" in Judith Harford and Claire Rush (eds). *Have Women Made a Difference? Women in Irish Universities, 1850–2010* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), 7–28.

⁸ Andrea Jacobs, "Examinations as Cultural Capital for the Victorian Schoolgirl: 'Thinking' with Bourdieu." *Women's History Review* 16, no. 2 (2007): 245–261.

⁹ Margaret Byers, "Statement Presented to the Endowed Schools Commission," 14 April 1886, Victoria College Archives, Belfast.

publication examination process “in Belfast, as elsewhere, we had to pass through the storm of ridicule incidental to the first attempt of girls to compete with men in public examinations.”¹⁰ An advertisement in *The Belfast Newsletter* illustrates the character and nature of higher education for females at this time:

Sydenham, Near Belfast,
 Establishment for the Board and Education of Young Ladies
 Under the personal superintendence of Mrs. and the Misses
 Milliken, assisted by a Resident Governess of experience and
 ability.
 The Domestic arrangements of this Establishment are as nearly as
 possible those of a Family.
 The following, and other, Masters of eminence will also instruct
 the Pupils, if required:-
 French and German - Herr Rylski
 Drawing - Mr Burgess
 Music (Pianoforte and Singing) - Mr Edeson
 Dancing and Calisthenics - Mrs Gubbins¹¹
 Sydenham is one of the most fashionable suburbs of Belfast; the
 situation is beautiful, commanding an extensive view of the
 unrivalled scenery of the Lough, and the locality is well known
 to be one of the most healthy in the North of Ireland.

This emphasis on lady-like, demure accomplishments in the socialisation of females was even more marked in Catholic schools. An advertisement in the *Freeman's Journal* for St Catherine's Convent Boarding School for Young Ladies, Co. Wexford noted:

The deportment and manners of the pupils are scrupulously attended to, no efforts are spared to give the young Ladies habits of order and neatness, that they may return to their families not only accomplished, but helpful and intelligent in all the duties of woman's sphere. The course of study comprises Religious Instruction, the ordinary branches of a solid English education, French, Dancing, Drawing, Vocal and Instrumental Music, and particular care is given to all kinds of plain and fancy Needlework.¹²

Notwithstanding the trenchant, embedded conservative ideology regarding the importance of educating Catholic girls for life as either a nun or wife/mother, the threat of proselytism triggered a change in direction in Catholic circles from the 1880s amid calls to establish a “Catholic Girton.”¹³ This change was clearly

¹⁰ Margaret Byers, “Victoria College, Belfast, with some account of its Connection with the Higher Education of Women in Ireland,” 1894, Victoria College Archives, Belfast.

¹¹ *The Belfast Newsletter*, October 1861.

¹² *Freeman's Journal*, 6 January 1872.

¹³ “Women's Higher Education in Ireland,” *The Lyceum*, April 1893.

motivated out of fear that “if higher schools be not opened for Catholic young women, they [would] seek collegiate and university courses in institutions that [were] non-Catholic.”¹⁴ The most prominent Catholic women’s colleges, the Dominican College Eccles Street, Dublin (1882), St Angela’s College and High School, Cork (1887), St Mary’s University College, Dublin (1893) and Loreto College, St Stephen’s Green, Dublin (1893), were run principally by the Dominican, Loreto and Ursuline orders.¹⁵

Whether Protestant or Catholic, women’s colleges were established with the purpose of targeting the more prestigious and valuable domains of knowledge, which resulted in participating women students having access to a range of high prestige cultural and social capital. They provided teaching in the liberal arts, exposing women for the first time to a rigorous academic curriculum, also providing the opportunity for participation in the public examination arena. As well as a focus on academic study, they promoted participation in student societies, advancing women’s capacity to fulfil a more public and active role in nineteenth-century Irish society.¹⁶ This represented an emancipatory shift in educational structures, as now participating women students could exercise cultural and social capital in their own right, rather than relying on familial males to cede power as their discretion. Many of the prominent women activists of the period, including Mary Hayden, Agnes O’Farrelly, Alice Oldham and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, were students and subsequently teachers at these colleges. Representing a seismic destabilisation of long-standing power structures, they also negotiated controlled and limited access for women to the university sphere, a strategy which, over time, paid dividends. Women gained access to the Royal University of Ireland in 1879, to the Queen’s Colleges from the 1880s, as well as marginal access to both the Catholic University and Trinity College Dublin in the same period.¹⁷ University leaders made it abundantly clear, however, that such access remained on male terms, terms which protected the existing power structures of the university sphere and in turn safeguarded the dominant hegemony. Addressing a Meeting of Convocation of Queen’s University in 1873, one member noted:

In considering the expediency of admitting women to university privileges we were at once confronted by the more general question of what has of late years vaguely been designated ‘women’s rights.’ The duties and privileges of women had never in any state of society been assumed to be identical with those of men. Here, if anywhere, the doctrine of equality would not apply. The sustenance of her offspring and their early care and training are the first

¹⁴ “Ireland and Women’s Higher Education,” *Catholic Review*, 5 July 1890.

¹⁵ Judith Harford, *The Opening of University Education to Women in Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008).

¹⁶ Judith Harford, “An Experiment in the Development of Social Networks for Women: Women’s Colleges in Ireland in the Nineteenth Century,” *Paedagogica Historica* 43, no. 3 (2007), 365–381.

¹⁷ Harford, *The Opening*.

duties of the female ... Was this Convocation prepared to declare its approval of granting a licence to women to perform surgical operations of every kind upon men as well as women, and also to treat all diseases to which men, as well as women, are liable? The time has not arrived when Convocation, or any other body of educated men, would entertain such a proposal.¹⁸

This position was even more entrenched within Roman Catholic circles where the Catholic hierarchy saw higher education for women as a fundamental threat to the power structure both of the Church and of the family unit. In a letter to William Walsh, Archbishop of Dublin written in 1908, Fr. William Delany, S.J., President of University College Dublin, observed:

That women are to receive an education I think we must accept but it is another question whether they are to sit in the same classrooms and be associated with men students throughout the University Course ... The working of a co-educative system tends to diminish refinement amongst the women students—and to lessen markedly in the men students the tone of courtesy and consideration for women.¹⁹

As Pašeta notes despite significant gains both in the educational and professional arenas, “conservative Catholic dogma continued to occupy a central place” in the debate over the appropriateness of higher education for women.²⁰ Reflecting a self-regulatory and delimiting circuit of power, early women activists frequently employed the argument that education would make women better mothers and companions of men.²¹ Byers, for example, suggested that reform of higher education for females had produced “its most important effect” in the contribution it had made to family life.²² She also advocated for the resourcing of “the thorough education of the motherhood of the nation” and the importance of preparing mothers to “superintend” the education of their daughters. Jellicoe also publicly advocated for the importance of higher education in preparing women to fulfil their traditional role and duties. She noted, for example, that although Alexandra College had not the tradition of a great seat of learning, it strove to represent what was “true and womanly in character.”²³ Students were advised that “no girl graduate of Alexandra College must be allowed to forget that she [could not] by any other acquirements or services compensate for the neglect of her peculiar duties as woman.” All of the

¹⁸ *Irish Times*, 16 October 1873.

¹⁹ William Delany to William Walsh, 17 November 1908, Delany Papers.

²⁰ Senia Pašeta, *Before the Revolution: Nationalism, Social Change and Ireland's Catholic Élite, 1879-1922* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999), 139.

²¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish – The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

²² Royal Commission on University Education in Ireland. Third Report of the Commissioners, 1902, 61.

²³ Anne Jellicoe, “A Few Words addressed to the Students’ Representative Body, Alexandra College,” Alexandra College Archives, Dublin.

women's colleges, whether Protestant or Catholic, ensured a particular focus on subjects deemed appropriate for women's domestic obligations. *St Angela*, the magazine of St Angela's College, operating under the auspices of the Ursuline Order, noted 'Dressmaking, Cookery and Laundry are universally considered three of the most essential items in the education of the modern girl.'²⁴

As Dyhouse has argued, the argument that women's education would better equip them to be wives and mothers was essentially a political one, which appealed to conservatives.²⁵ Vicinus notes "rituals of domesticity were clearly intended to reassure parents and the public (and the women themselves) that higher education would not cut them off from their peers and families."²⁶ In particular, there was a concerted effort across these early leaders to distinguish between their campaign for higher education reform and the wider women's movement. Maria Grey (1816-1906), founder of the National Union for the Improvement of the Education of Women of all Classes (1871), noted at a meeting at the Ulster Hall in January 1872 that the movement she was advocating was "in no way connected with any political movement in connection with what are called 'the rights of women.'" Moreover, she "emphatically disclaimed for herself and those acting with her in this matter any intention to agitate directly or indirectly for what are called 'women's rights'."²⁷ This discourse aligned with that of the leading male figures, gatekeepers whose power and influence was critical in allowing women activists the space in which to incrementally shift the boundaries, without rupturing the still prevalent world view. Speaking at a ceremony to lay the memorial stone at the Belfast Ladies' Collegiate School in December 1873, Rev. William Johnston, Moderator of the General Assembly, commented:

It was of the utmost importance that women should be educated for the position which they were designed to occupy. The intellectual and the moral faculties needed to be vigorously cultivated, if women are to be the companions and counsellors of men.²⁸

At a meeting in Trinity College Dublin in 1877 to discuss the function of higher education for women, Rev. Professor Jellett, observed:

A liberal education was desirable to fit men for any line of life that man may choose to pursue, and, admitting that fact, why should not the same be applicable to women? A woman would manage her household all the better if

²⁴ *St. Angela*, Magazine of St. Angela's College, May 1920, p. 58, Ursuline Archives Cork.

²⁵ Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).

²⁶ Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women, Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920*. (London: Virago Press, 1985), 143.

²⁷ *Belfast Newsletter*, 16 January 1872.

²⁸ *Belfast Newsletter*, 24 December 1873.

she had a liberal education, and that was the very fact which the Alexandra College embodied.²⁹

This strategy of accommodation included the clear preservation of social class stratification. Efforts were made at Alexandra College to “prevent people from too low a grade in society attending lectures.”³⁰ It also included ensuring that the brief of the women’s colleges did not trespass inappropriately into the public domain. Instances where women students overstepped the boundaries of propriety by expressing dissenting opinions resulted in significant admonishment and curtailment of their freedom.³¹ Lerner notes that “thinking women, like men, not only needed other thinkers against whom to argue in order to test out their ideas, but they needed audiences, whether private or public.”³² Yet as Delamont and Duffin observe, “in order to make their ideas known women had to articulate them in a form which was acceptable to men.”³³

Keeping the public onside also meant ensuring women students and academics were not considered “unlady-like.” Crow notes, “to be considered unladylike was to court the outer darkness.”³⁴ C.L. Maynard, first principal of Westfield College, and the first woman to read philosophy at the University of Cambridge observed “it was a time to be careful with regard to the strictures of our adversaries.”³⁵ Women graduates were keenly aware of the precarious position they held. One graduate observed in the “Girls’ Graduates Column” of *St. Stephen’s*, a publication of University College, “there is no creature so much maligned and so misunderstood as the girl-graduate. She is a ‘*bas-bleu*,’ i.e., an outcast, and if she desires social popularity she must maintain a strict incognita. She goes about fearful of any one discovering that she is a B.A.”³⁶ Even women who were themselves actively involved in campaigning for educational reform were keenly aware of the stigma attached to university educated women, the so-called “blue stocking.” Mary Hayden noted in 1887: “It was a blessed relief to meet a man who didn’t know I was a B.A. and didn’t begin by saying ‘he was afraid of me.’”³⁷

²⁹ *Irish Times*, 6 June 1877.

³⁰ M.C. Ferguson, “Alexandra College Dublin,” *The Woman’s World*, London 1887, 129. Alexandra College Dublin Archives at Alexandra College.

³¹ See Harford, 2008, 119-120.

³² Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 221.

³³ Sara Delamont and Lorna Duffin (eds), *The Nineteenth Century Woman: Her Cultural and Physical World*, (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 12.

³⁴ Duncan Crow, *The Victorian Woman* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), 53.

³⁵ CL Maynard, *Between College Terms* (London: The University Press, 1910), 189.

³⁶ *St. Stephens: A Record of University Life, 1901-1906*, James Joyce Library, University College Dublin, 1902, vol. 1, no. 4, p. 74.

³⁷ Mary Hayden Diaries, 21 June 1887 MS 16,648, National Library of Ireland.

Senders Pedersen argues that the role of women heads of schools and colleges during this phase in the movement for higher education simply reinforced paradigms of femininity and that their efforts to improve women's education were in order for women to "more perfectly perform a subordinate, supportive social role."³⁸ McCrone, however, suggests it was more complex and required a negotiation of roles and ideals.³⁹ The evidence from the Irish context would support the position that women leaders were careful to play the "rules of the game" in support of a more ambitious agenda.

No Longer Prepared to be "Shut Up in Women's Colleges Alone:" The Search for Equal Treatment Over Special Treatment

The late 1890s and early 1900s witnessed an intensification of efforts to find a settlement to the university question with a particular focus on establishing a framework which would ensure denominational equality. The Palles (1898), Robertson (1901) and Fry Commissions (1906) all occurred within an eight-year period, shining a very public spotlight on the issue of education reform. The women's lobby took advantage of the opportunity to agitate for equal treatment over special treatment. Their collective success in the public examination arena and capacity to forge strategic networks had generated a sense of confidence and direction previously unknown in the early, tentative stages of the campaign. The emergence of a group of highly educated, articulate and determined women graduates replaced the old guard of Byers and Jellicoe, their youth, energy and confidence generating a more radical agenda. While in the initial stages, they had been content with the establishment of women's colleges, for many of these colleges now came to symbolise a two-tier system in which women were subordinate and managed. Initial demands for access to certain aspects of higher education soon led to demands for the same rights and privileges as men. Their position was helped by the international move towards university access for women, in particular in Britain and the US, where the women's lobby had made significant strides.⁴⁰

³⁸ Joyce Senders Pedersen, "Some Victorian Headmistresses: A Conservative Tradition of Social Reform," *Victorian Studies* 24, no. 4 (1981), 464.

³⁹ Kathleen E. McCrone, "'Playing the Game' and 'Playing the Piano': Physical Culture and Culture at Girls' Public Schools c.1850-1914." In Geoffrey Walford (Ed.), *The Private Schooling of Girls: Past and Present* (London: Woburn Press, 1993), 33-55.

⁴⁰ Carol Dyhouse, *No Distinction of Sex? Women in British Universities, 1870-1939* (London: Routledge, 1995); Stephanie Evans, *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954: An Intellectual History Gainesville* (University of Florida Press, 2008); Barbara Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

A previously cohesive lobby displayed fundamental fault lines in evidence before the Robertson Commission on University Education in particular. Addressing the Commission, Henrietta White, Principal of Alexandra College Dublin, Margaret Byers, Principal of Victoria College, and James Macken, on behalf of Loreto College, argued in favour of the retention of the women's colleges and the funding of a single-sex model of higher education. Among the arguments they made were the importance of "women taught by women,"⁴¹ and the likelihood that in a co-educational setting, women would be "crushed out of the higher appointments as teachers."⁴²

Mary Hayden, speaking on behalf of St Mary's University College, Alice Oldham on behalf of the Central Association of Irish School Mistresses, and Annie McElderry and Agnes O' Farrelly on behalf of the Irish Association of Women Graduates all supported co-education and full and unequivocal access for women to a co-educational university landscape. Presenting evidence in support of their argument from both England and the US, they cautioned that women were no longer prepared to be "shut up in women's colleges alone."⁴³

While the final report of the Commission was inconclusive and revealed fundamental differences between the various commissioners, it recommended that all degrees and other privileges of the university should be open, without distinction of sex. It further recommended that the existing women's colleges be converted into residential halls in connection with the various universities.⁴⁴ The Commission's findings were, however, overshadowed by developments which had occurred in the interim. After complex and contentious negotiations, Trinity College had decided, prior to the issuing of final recommendations by the Robertson Commission, that it would admit women. This followed a protracted and public campaign which had met with staunch resistance from the all-male university board who had previously appeared unshakable on the topic of co-education:

Trinity College must be regarded as a foundation established for the education of male students only ... The admission of women as students of the College ... would appear to be calculated seriously to weaken and disturb the discipline of the College[,] and the maintenance on the part of the male students of that decorum and sense of propriety towards the opposite sex which are essential features in a liberal education ... would be wholly inconsistent with the Charters & Letters Patent constituting the foundation of the College.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Robertson Commission, Appendix to the Third Report, Minutes of Evidence, p. 61.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 319.

⁴⁴ Robertson Commission, Final Report, 49-50.

⁴⁵ TCD Mun/P/1/2489, 19/2/1895, Trinity College Dublin Library.

Despite their intransigent opposition to the admission of women students spanning decades, by 1904 capitulation proved the only viable option. The opening of universities to women in Britain and the United States as well as “a rising sympathy with the claim for women’s admission” both within the College itself as well as among the wider public had left the authorities with no option but to concede.⁴⁶

One of the most immediate effects of the opening of Trinity College to women was to highlight the invidious position of Catholic women students, denied access to University College, the former Catholic University of Ireland formally established in 1854. Mirroring the concessions Trinity College had meted out to women prior to 1904, the Catholic University had offered marginal, controlled access to women from 1901. “Public lectures” were held in the adjacent Aula Maxima in order to avoid allowing women access to the “cloistered halls and forbidden staircases” of the university.⁴⁷ Separate apartments were provided, with cloakrooms, a waiting room and a female Dean of Residence for this purpose.⁴⁸ While William Delany, President of University College, was adamant that women should be provided for “in an institution of their own,”⁴⁹ the College Registrar, reflecting the views of many, argued that the admission of women to Trinity College had created “a new situation, had intensified the need that University College, for the sake of its own prestige, should prove no less progressive.”⁵⁰

Regardless, events at a national level sealed the university’s fate and it became subsumed into a new co-educational framework under the Irish Universities Act of 1908. Under the terms of the act, two new universities were created in Ireland; the National University of Ireland (NUI), with constituent colleges in Dublin (UCD), Cork (UCC) and Galway (UCG), and Queen’s University Belfast. Both were open to women on equal terms as men. Yet, while both were theoretically non-denominational, the act was in many ways a clever compromise, conceding to the demands for denominational education on both sides without overtly supporting it. As Pašeta has noted “covertly sectarian,” the act ensured that Queen’s University Belfast catered for Presbyterians, while the NUI catered primarily for Catholics.⁵¹ Confident of their ability to “catholicize” the new university the Catholic hierarchy

⁴⁶ Olive Purser, *Women in Dublin University, 1904-1954* (Dublin: Dublin University Press, 1954), 3.

⁴⁷ *St Stephen’s*, March 1906, Vol. 1, no. 11, 252.

⁴⁸ Jesuits (Ireland), with assistance of Prof. Mary Hayden, “Entrance of Women Students,” in *A Page of Irish History: Story of University College Dublin, 1883-1909*, (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1930), 468-72.

⁴⁹ William Delany to William Walsh, 17 November 1908, Delany Papers, Irish Jesuit Archives.

⁵⁰ Extract from letter, dated 1st June 1904 from Francis Sheehy Skeffington, Registrar and Bursar, University College Dublin, to Very Rev Wm Delany LLD, President University College Dublin.

⁵¹ Senia Pašeta, “The Catholic Hierarchy and the Irish University Question, 1880-1908,” *History* 85, no. 278 (2000), 282.

finally accepted the NUI as the best settlement they could reach.⁵² They expressed concerns, nonetheless, over the implications of co-education for Catholic women, warning that “Catholic nuns could not, under any circumstances, assist at College lectures.”⁵³

As McCartney notes, it is ironic that the Irish Universities Act, which conferred on women equality with men in all matters relating to university education, also brought into question the status of the women’s colleges.⁵⁴ Under the terms of the act, only students of the constituent colleges of the NUI or of colleges designated with “recognised college” status could sit for degree examinations of the university. While in the British and US contexts, women’s colleges continued to enjoy support and demonstrate currency, ultimately surviving the advent of co-education, in the Irish their fate was less successful and they were effectively wound down. Having played such a foundational, critical role in the opening up of university education to women, they were subsequently confined to the margins of university life acting as university hostels for women students as well as continuing to provide second-level education.⁵⁵

Access Without Equality

Mirroring international trends, the NUI and QUB, like other newly founded co-educational universities, typically permitted women entry on equal grounds as men, whereas access for women to Trinity College was more restricted. In order to control and monitor the movement of women students, Trinity College drew up a stringent set of regulations, which included a ban on women residing on campus and a requirement to leave by 6pm each evening:

Except when entering or leaving the College, they shall wear their College Caps and Gowns in the College Squares and Parks, unless accompanied by a chaperon. They will not be expected to remove their Caps in saluting the Provost and Fellows, nor required to do so during lectures. Ladies (undergraduates and others) shall not visit at private rooms in College unless accompanied by a chaperon, except with the Provost’s sanction in exceptional circumstances. Women Students shall not attend Lectures, unless resident either with their family in town, or in a Hall or lodging approved by the College

⁵² Alfred O’ Rahilly, “The Irish University Question,” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 51, no. 202 (1962), 209.

⁵³ Sacredos, “Mr Birrell’s University Bill,” *New Ireland Review* XXIX, (March – August 1908), 214.

⁵⁴ Donal McCartney, *UCD: A National Idea: The History of University College Dublin* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1999), 80.

⁵⁵ Harford, *The Opening of University Education to Women in Ireland*.

authorities. They should communicate with the Lady Registrar at least once a week before the commencement of lectures.⁵⁶

These regulations remained official until the 1960s, although by then were less actively policed. However, even though women could now stay on campus until midnight, they were still obliged to sign in and out at the front gate after 6 p.m.⁵⁷ Again reflecting international norms, one of the first systemic responses to the admission of women students was to appoint women staff to oversee and monitor their social and moral welfare.⁵⁸ A Lady Registrar, Lucy Gwynn, daughter of John Gwynn, Regius Professor of Divinity, was appointed in February 1905. Olive Purser, first woman scholar who entered in Michaelmas term 1904 remembered, an integral part of Gwynn's role was "to control our movements to some extent and to protect the College and the students from criticism."⁵⁹ Purser further recalled how the image of women students in cap and gown visible to the general public through the front gate was a source of "stimulating gossip."⁶⁰ Commenting on the admission of women students, the College newspaper noted:

On entering College chapel last Sunday morning we were filled with amazement at the unusually large attendance, many faces which we had never before observed inside the sacred precincts and the possessors of which the Junior Dean had long given up fining in despair beamed with expectancy from the corded pew. The Bishop of Derry must be the attraction, we thought; however, we were speedily disillusioned, for on passing through the doorway, the first thing that met our gaze was a notice "Lady Undergraduates" affixed to the nearest pew. This, then, was the explanation. Many questions at once presented themselves to our mind. Will they be fined for non-attendance? Will they keep their caps on? What kind of surplice will they wear? Will they sing in the choir? Alas, as no fair maidens ventured to appear our questions remained for the time unanswered.

A residence for women students was established in 1908 in Dartry, a residential suburb of Dublin, with Elizabeth Margaret Cunningham appointed as first warden, a position she held for thirty-two years. Educated at Girton College Cambridge, Cunningham was determined that Trinity Hall would mirror the intellectual and social

⁵⁶ Regulations Which Women Students of Trinity College are Expected to Observe, 1905, *Dublin University Calendar*, 1905.

⁵⁷ Susan Parkes, *A Danger to the Men? A History of Women in Trinity College Dublin, 1904-2004* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2004).

⁵⁸ Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*; Alison Prentice, "Bluestockings, Feminists, or Women Workers? A Preliminary Look at Women's Early Employment at the University of Toronto," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 2 (1991), 231–62; Margaret Nash (Ed). *Women's Higher Education in the United States: New Historical Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁵⁹ Purser, *Women in Dublin University*, 9.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 5.

milieu of Girton.⁶¹ One of the first women students, Marion Weir Johnston, who realised the worst fears of the college authorities by marrying one of the younger fellows, Stephen Kelleher, recalled her early experiences as a student:

I had to keep my terms by examination and was not allowed to attend lectures. Dr Salmon had said that women would only enter TCD over his dead body, and when I arrived in Dublin in 1904 I was informed that as he had died that day, the examination had been put off until after the funeral. The second term I had also to take by examination. Then in the summer I was joined by Miss Tuckey and Miss Shegog We were made to sit in the front row, right away from the men. My first examinations were held upstairs in the East Chapel building, with Miss Barlow, sister of the then vice provost, sitting in the room as a chaperone, and a porter at the foot of the stairs to stand guard...⁶²

The prospect of inappropriate mixing of the sexes prompted some concerned parents to lobby for a separate women's college attached to Trinity:

One cannot but ask why the authorities of T.C.D. do not see that higher education for girls on this side of the Channel cannot compete with that given under the guardianship of the Women's Colleges in Oxford and Cambridge unless conditions arise in T.C.D. placing the whole life of women students under similar tutelage. For parents at a distance from Dublin, the question of allowing their daughters to enter T.C.D. hinges upon this point, and it would seem that the inevitable tendency of the new regulations must be to very largely increase the regrettable exodus of both men and women students to the English universities. The appointment of a Lady Registrar is a step towards solving the problems, but the difficulties of the situation seem to me to point to a Woman's College in connection with T.C.D. as their only ultimate and satisfactory solution.⁶³

However, "determined to give the enemy no cause to blaspheme," women students applied themselves to their studies, generally sitting in the front in classes and sharing benches on one side of the room in laboratories.⁶⁴

Unlike the restrictions applied to women entering Trinity College Dublin, women were admitted to all degrees and offices of both the NUI and QUB in 1908. The senate of both universities was required to have at least one woman member nominated. Margaret Byers, principal of Victoria College Belfast, and Mary A. Hutton, prominent Celtic scholar, were nominated to the first senate of QUB, while Mary Hayden was nominated to the senate of the NUI. Hayden, along with her close colleague Agnes O'Farrelly, was also appointed to the governing body of UCD and

⁶¹ Parkes, *A Danger to the Men?*

⁶² Quoted in Parkes, *A Danger to the Men?*, 61.

⁶³ *Irish Times*, 11 March 1905.

⁶⁴ Purser, *Women in Dublin University*, 6.

to the chair of modern Irish history in 1911. A number of high-profile women were also appointed to senior posts in the other NUI colleges. Mary Ryan was appointed Professor of Romance Languages at UCC in 1910, while the first three professors of education were also to be women—Elizabeth O’ Sullivan (1910–35), Frances Vaughan (1936–48), and Lucy Duggan (1949–62). M.J. Donovan O’ Sullivan was appointed Professor of History at UCG in 1914, while Emily Anderson was appointed Professor of German in 1917.⁶⁵ Hence, as Fitzgerald and Harford (2021, p. 489) argue, “women academics were the direct beneficiaries of the gendered benevolence of university administrators, who saw opportunities to simultaneously resolve the ‘problem’ of women students as well as offer an appropriate education.” Despite the number of women appointed to high profile positions in the NUI, their number, as a proportion of the entire university staff, was relatively small. Furthermore, the majority of senior appointments was in the Faculty of Arts, and this remained the trend for some time. The Irish context thus mirrored international norms in ensuring that “academic women were situated on the periphery of men’s scholarly worlds precisely in order to minimise their competition with men.”⁶⁶ Furthermore, while on one level an auspicious start, women’s participation in the senior ranks of the NUI declined significantly during the first generation of the Irish independent state.⁶⁷

Women students of the NUI, like women academics, also operated as “outsiders within an academic hierarchy marked by male privilege.”⁶⁸ Although less overt than the code of discipline to which Trinity women students were subjected, their movements were also closely monitored and similar strategies were adopted in order to maximise surveillance and control. In UCD, for example, a Lady Superintendent, E.H. Ennis, was charged with responsibility for students’ “general conduct outside the precincts of the College.”⁶⁹ Within lecture settings, a “Sunday school atmosphere” and a “frigid decorum of behaviour” were said to prevail.⁷⁰ Similar rules regarding the mixing of the sexes outside of lectures to those in operation in Trinity

⁶⁵ Susan Parkes and Judith Harford, “Women and Higher Education in Ireland” in Deirdre Raftery and S.M. Parkes (eds). *Female Education in Ireland, 1700–1900* (Dublin and Portland OR: Irish Academic Press, 2007), 105–144.

⁶⁶ Tanya Fitzgerald, T. Outsiders or Equals? A History of Women Professors at the University of New Zealand 1911–1961. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 15.

⁶⁷ John Walsh, *Higher Education in Ireland 1922–2016: Politics, Policy and Power – A History of Higher Education in the Irish State*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 121.

⁶⁸ Tanya FitzGerald & Judith Harford, “Life Threads: Reading the Professional Lives of Mary Hayden (1862-1942) and Virginia Crocheron Gildersleeve (1877-1965),” *History of Education* 50, Issue 4 (2021), 485.

⁶⁹ *University College Dublin Calendar*, 1910-11, p. 83, James Joyce Library, University College Dublin.

⁷⁰ *National Student*, May 1910, James Joyce Library, University College Dublin.

College Dublin also prevailed.⁷¹ Women at UCC were also subject to more stringent rules than their male counterparts, including having to adhere to a conservative dress code, being subject to supervision, and a prohibition on smoking.⁷²

Many of the Catholic religious orders who had been at the vanguard of the higher education reform movement operated hostels for women students, which provided some reassurance to Catholic parents concerned about the potential improprieties of co-education. Kate O' Brien, novelist and playwright, recalled her time at Loreto Hall, a student residence run by the Loreto Order, as follows:

Granted we had to be indoors at eleven—but some of the greatest men of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries had to accept a nine o' clock curfew in Paris and Salamanca. After “lights out” we lit candles in our cubicles and heated up Bovril and crept downstairs and stole Mother Eucharist's honey and brown bread. We were always hungry and seem to have been always impelled to talk and argue half the night.⁷³

Mary Colum, literary critic and author, recalled her arrival at St. Mary's Dominican Hall as follows:

Arrived at the residence house, I found a couple of my boarding-school companions. The girls, varying in age between seventeen and the early twenties, were from various well-known Irish schools; the older ones were studying for masters' degrees. The residence house was in charge of nuns, though no nuns actually lived there; there were other residence houses in the city, some Catholic, some Protestant, some grander and more expensive than this one, but I had been told before I came that this one had a freer and more liberal atmosphere than the others. At the same time university education for women was not as usual as it is now, and we were far from being as unhampered in our movements as American college girls. On my arrival I was told the rules by a sort of chaperone who was domiciled in the residence house. No going out after supper—supper was tea and bread and butter—without express permission from various nuns ... For the first-year students, no going downtown at all without permission.⁷⁴

Conclusion

This paper has traced the contours of the history of higher education for women in Ireland, signposting competing discourses and dominant themes. It has charted this

⁷¹ Judith Harford, “Words Importing the Masculine Includes Females: Women at University College Dublin in the First Decade,” in Sheelagh Drudy (ed). *Education in Ireland: Challenge and Change* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2009), 24–34.

⁷² John A. Murphy, *The College: A History of Queen's/University College Cork, 1845-1995* (Cork: University College Cork Press, 1995).

⁷³ Kate O'Brien, “As to University Life,” *University Review* I, no. 6, (1955), 6.

⁷⁴ Mary Colum, *Life and the Dream* (London: Macmillan, 1947), 31.

period in the history of women's education according to three distinct yet interrelated phases: Accommodation vs. Transformation; Special Treatment vs. Equal Treatment; and Access without Equality. It has demonstrated that the restrictive control of an overwhelmingly patriarchal society was predicated on a fear of change and a strong desire to safeguard the existing *status quo* in the face of a fundamental social and cultural shift in the quality and scope of women's education. This societal unease was mirrored in wider counter-movements which sought to challenge existing social values/mores and invert societal structures which were reflective of deeply inscribed patterns of behaviours, ones which had both bolstered and reproduced the exercise of power for generations previously. The resulting tension between those who advocated for a more liberal access to higher education for women and those who considered such a movement an affront to long-standing social values created an initially unconformable liminal space which eventually morphed into a more liberal, enlightened educational landscape for women (albeit those from privileged backgrounds). Despite this shift, established structures of power and privilege prevailed and women continue to represent a minority in the senior echelons of higher education in Ireland, operating on the periphery of a gendered research economy.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Judith Harford, "The Path to Professorship: Reflections from Women Professors in Ireland," *Irish Educational Studies* 39, no. 2, (2020), 193-204.