

THE FOUNDING OF WOMEN'S COLLEGES IN BRITAIN AND THE UNITED STATES IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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In this brief paper I would like to explore certain aspects of women's higher education in Britain and the United States centering on the history of women's liberal arts colleges. I will suggest the role played by the college idea in extending higher education benefits to marginal or excluded populations. In fact, the paper can also be considered as a contribution to the literature on the role of alternative institutions in absorbing new consumer demands and thus preserving a nation's higher education system from severe populist or radical pressures. The woman's college takes its place alongside academies, technical universities, vocational institutes, extra-mural and other distance learning innovations.

The college is in itself an arresting Anglo-American development. It is, as Burton Clark has noted, "distinctive,"¹ or rather, it has that capability and can, under proper circumstances and leadership, find a position for itself within the interstices of gigantic national systems of education. The words "college" and "university" in their Latin versions were originally equivalent. Neither referred specifically to a type of institution but to a corporation or society, a community of common purpose. The words parted meanings in the centuries that followed the birth of universities as institutions of learning and teaching. Colleges were either sub-units of universities, even if (as was the case) founded separately, or free-standing. There were many of these throughout Europe, and many more were established by Jesuits later on, yet by the modern period they had largely disappeared as significant teaching institutions of the liberal arts, remaining only in their original if rejuvenated form at Oxford and Cambridge.

Cambridge exported the example of Emmanuel College, a seventeenth-century Puritan foundation, to the New World, and colleges took hold in New England. Throughout the nineteenth century the protestant sects were great builders of New England-style colleges, coast to coast, and even the University of California in one sense began modestly as a private liberal arts college in Oakland before becoming the University of California at Berkeley. New colleges have continued to be founded, right up to the

present, now usually as church-related institutions reflecting the sectarian basis of American religion. Colleges may grow into universities – in the United States this is a relatively simple matter of a name change requiring no particular government or legislative intervention (as in Europe) once a proper charter has been granted. In some cases the change of name reflects a broadening of the curriculum and educational missions, as when Harvard, towards the end of the eighteenth century, decided to add professional schools with advanced degrees. This is the customary distinction between a university and a college, but it does not hold true in every instance, nor does the name “university” automatically indicate that the institution is empowered to award doctoral degrees. Large segments of state university systems bear the name without the privilege.

College was the chosen instrument for educating women in England and the United States in the Victorian Century. In both countries colleges were associated with character formation, partly for special reasons having to do with a protestant and “republican” (the “Atlantic tradition” of civic humanism) inheritance and partly because of the young age at which students attended. Age at entry had actually been rising in England throughout the eighteenth century but not in Scotland, whose five universities (Aberdeen University was really two colleges, one historical, the other new). A college was in fact, as ambiguities in the historical situation indicated, like a school, implying the need for close supervision by teachers or - a word heard often in the history of male colleges at Oxford and Cambridge - “discipline.”² Furthermore, not always but often, depending upon location, a college was likely to be residential and hence more of a primary shaping institution, which suited prevailing theories of the importance of liberal education as preparation for leadership (UK) or citizenship (US).

The college form, generally a series of quadrangles, more open and park-like in the American than in the original English setting, acquired spatial and architectural values from the Romantic movement onwards.³ The symbolism, associations and beauty built into the college idea reinforced the conception of colleges as ideal places for shaping personality, creating friendships and teaching what today in the United States is called in jargon “people skills.” Because their preferred location was in small towns or countryside – there are exceptions – they were isolated from other influences, notably those belonging to

the city. There is even an anti-urban heritage associated with colleges, a walling off from the city symbolically (and in Europe physically), intensifying their effect on the young men and women in attendance and shaping their patterns of loyalty and identity. Creating sanctuaries for the young – and the definition of “young” has varied with the ages – was a settled feature of Anglo-American college education in any case, irrespective of gender. There are exceptions. The founder of Smith College in Massachusetts actually wanted students to participate in the small town life of Northampton, in the center of which the college sits.⁴ This is a complex subject that cannot be pursued for want of space

The first institutions for women in the United States were not called colleges but “seminaries.” Pride of place is usually given to Mount Holyoke, but as this college was founded as a finishing school in 1837 and did not appropriate the name “college” until later, there are other contenders. Georgia Female College (now Wesleyan College in Macon), established in 1836, gets the prize from some, Mary Sharp College of 1850 (closed in the late nineteenth century) from others because it followed the model of the men’s colleges.⁵ The word “seminary” itself was ambiguous, since it could also just mean higher education, and continued to be used as such in the later decades of the nineteenth century at places like Harvard. Yet in actuality the seminaries for women were really finishing schools in the spirit of the 1840s London foundations of Queen’s College, the North London Collegiate School and Bedford College. Their transformation into higher education colleges was therefore a principal development in the history of higher education for women, entailing a reconceptualization of mission. This meant degree-based instruction at a higher intellectual level, and, because of other circumstances, a reconsideration of the difference between a “girl” and a “woman.” Such distinctions were being drawn at the men’s colleges. Separating “boy” from “man” at Oxford and Cambridge was part of the rites of passage inheritances that the dons had to contend with if there was to be an inner transformation from school-like colleges to knowledge-based universities.⁶ Coming of age, and the meaning of that for institutional self-definition was the result of a number of factors, such as rising age at entry and improved secondary or college preparatory instruction. It was solved first in elite education, as we might expect (at least from the perspective of intellectual standards) and more slowly (if at all!) in mass or popular

education. Yet even within elite education the process occurred far more slowly than we might imagine, handicapped in an interesting way by a Victorian preoccupation with youth, beauty and vigor, especially in England, that astonished visitors from countries without the traditions and institutions associated with *in loco parentis* institutions. The games ethic of British and American higher education, accentuating youth and physical prowess, prolonged the sense of higher education as an extension of lower education. That fascinating tale has yet to be told in its richest complexities.

Coeducation is not incompatible with colleges, although that development in both countries is more closely related to universities, especially those supported at public expense. The first coeducational college in America is generally thought to be Oberlin College in Ohio, which admitted women four years after its foundation in 1837. Little-known Hillsdale admitted women from the outset in 1844. The immensely distinguished Quaker college, Swarthmore in Pennsylvania, founded by Hicksite Quakers and influenced by Oberlin, accepted women upon opening in 1870. Among pre-land grant universities, the University of Iowa can claim coeducation from 1855.⁷ Jefferson's "democratic" state University of Virginia, however, held out until 1970.

Outside the home, single-sex schooling had been the historical rule rather than the exception, and the resistance to mixed classes was significant and its history full of artful dodges. Plausible arguments were available on both sides. Women would provide a necessary leavening in the classroom, since by nature they were more restrained and responsible. Or, the presence of women would unfortunately encourage the high spirits for which late adolescents were notorious. Instances of both can be found. Medical students in Britain, who tended to be unruly and pleasure-loving, often delighted in the childish tormenting of women students, and the juvenile male inhabitants of American universities were hardly ever models of decorum. So even where coeducation existed, women were not necessarily treated with respect by men coming of age. This is a well-documented subject.

By the end of the last century the principle of coeducation was firmly established in American higher education, perhaps largely on grounds of expense and probably owing much to the development of publicly-supported systems of state universities, given a boost by the Land Grant Act of 1861 signed into law by President Lincoln in 1862.⁸ The

women's colleges lost their monopoly over higher education. Each expansion of the American higher education system since then has reduced their proportion of the relevant age cohorts even more, as well as number. More women's colleges existed in the nineteenth century than today. Yet their story and place remain significant given the overall importance of "college" in the United States as the standard for elite and liberal arts and sciences education.

In Britain, also a self-help and individualist society in the nineteenth century, higher education colleges, or university colleges, were regarded as the best way for new educational institutions to begin. The archetype was University College London, later subordinated to a federal system. The largely liberal and radical founders of the London University of the 1820s preferred the title "university" to that of "college" since they included a medical school and wanted the prestige value that in Britain and especially Germany (but not necessarily in America) accrued to the title. And how could it be that a world capital had only a college? From this point onwards colleges proliferated in Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds, Liverpool, Bristol, continuing on into the twentieth century and even beyond the Second World War (the experiment of Leeds) – but were always held back from independence by being made part of larger federations with examining centers. Even privileged Durham, founded in the 1830s and modeled on Christ Church Oxford, submitted to the authority of London for one year.

Here was a structural complication that would affect the expansion of women's education in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century. The famous women's colleges that were founded at Oxford and Cambridge in the 1860s were not allowed to take their degrees from the universities, with which they had a special affiliation. The fight to rectify that situation carried well into the twentieth century and in the case of Cambridge ended only a half century ago. The women's colleges in London were still being rejected as degree-worthy as late as 1862, although attendance at some lectures in the men's colleges had been occurring since the 1830s. In Scotland only St Andrews had anything resembling a collegiate structure; and even proponents of women's higher education there were reluctant to force their way into that system.⁹ Yet if degrees were required, the better strategy was to open universities.

How handicapped were the colleges without degrees? That depends upon how Victorians valued the degree as an entrance to public life. The degree was becoming important, but social origins still mattered. Furthermore, customs, habits and the tortuous applications and evasions of rules were effective barriers to women's general participation with or without degrees. Its absence was irksome but not in itself the cause of marginalization. In other respects, college histories seem to indicate flourishing communities of talented young women and eccentric heads of houses, and much kicking against the traces. It could in fact be argued that within the collegiate environment, not fully constrained by the need to subordinate all teaching to examination degree requirements, a certain freedom and creativity existed that produced leaders of women movements, writers and other creative personalities. Does that same kind of privilege exist today, even in colleges, in a far more bureaucratic environment and under the pressure of the Sex Discrimination Act?

American women's colleges were free-standing and not subject to the pressures of a federation of central examining system. They were empowered to give degrees. Government intervention was minimal beyond granting charters of incorporation. Hence women's colleges could innovate or conform. There is no clear pattern here. The wishes of founders, the policies of presidents, the character of the student body and their family origins and culture, the particular historical circumstances all played a part in determining the level of risk-taking. Some women's colleges were more concerned with aspects of finishing school education than others. Bryn Mawr quickly acquired a reputation as the most intellectual of the colleges. Smith followed suit. Spelman, as a college for African-American women founded in 1881 in Atlanta by white women missionaries from New England, had special responsibilities termed "racial uplift" by one historian. According to another, the broader role for educated African-American women within the African-American community narrowed after Emancipation to accord more with white middle class stereotypes regarding marriage and family, with a corresponding tightening of college rules, regulations and procedures. The requirement of submission to home and husbands has been a special problem in the twentieth century because by 1910, and except for the

interwar years, the number of degree-bearing African-American women has been greater than that of men.¹⁰

The very presence of women's colleges in the United States siphoned away some of the pressure for coeducation that was accumulating in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Conversely, the creation of a new sector of state-supported universities called "Land Grant" or "People's Universities" removed similar pressure from the women's colleges, thus ensuring their survival. Smith eased the burden of the women's issue on neighboring Amherst, Wellesley on Harvard,¹¹ and the women's colleges of Britain performed the same function for universities new and old. Coeducation has made obvious inroads, but single-sex colleges could never have absorbed the demand for mass access.

Curricular experiment is in one of the notable facts about women's colleges. Some insisted on a classical education on a par with men's colleges. Others "abridged" that inheritance, introducing, as did Elmira College in New York state (1855), up to four years of science. Four of the original eight professors of Vassar were in science fields, and Vassar boasted three microscopes at a time when these were scarce, as well as the "third best" telescope in the United States. Smith briefly taught "household chemistry," as did Wellesley. History, political science, economics, logic, English literature, the Bible, modern languages, English literature, the ornamental arts – all are to be found in part, as early or as late introductions in the curriculum of women's colleges. Comparing the curricula of women's colleges with those of men at the end of the last century, one writer observes that there was less Greek and more modern language teaching, but also more science, especially the biological sciences. Individual women's colleges could vary dramatically from men's. There were more chemistry majors at Mount Holyoke than at neighboring Amherst, and interestingly (given the tendency for stereotyping in history), more undergraduates reading English at Amherst than at Mount Holyoke.¹²

There is some evidence to support the view that the survival of liberal education in American higher education occurred because women chose the courses that men were fleeing in favor of business and technical subjects.¹³ Non-traditional subjects were also featured. It is noted that the health sciences, for example, really developed within the context of the women's colleges as a response to fears that intense intellectual application

would undermine stamina. When enrollments fell during the Civil War because men were taken away as soldiers, women students filled the gap and kept numerous institutions afloat. This trend continued. At the University of California, for example, just under half the undergraduates were women in the year 1900. In 1902 the university led the country in the numbers of women admitted to coeducational institutions. In 1910 48% of total enrollments were women. Five years earlier there had been more women graduates than men.¹⁴

Still, some supporters were bound to be disappointed. “[T]he woman’s college...great increase in size and wealth points toward the conserving power of safe imitation,”¹⁵ wrote one observer. But the select colleges had only been interested in “culture,” meaning liberal rather than applied education. In the academic year 1896-97, Wellesley had dropped “domestic science” after just a few years of teaching.¹⁶

The making of friends and connections, the coming of age in a special environment where self-confidence could be enhanced, the close personal relationships with teachers, some of those relationships even inspiring (a few also embarrassing) – in sum, the advantages of small scale, intimacy and personal attention were and are probably as important as instruments of self-realization and socialization as any formal curriculum.¹⁷ Rita McWilliams-Tulberg has stressed the importance of close teaching relationships in the Cambridge women’s colleges.¹⁸ How the unique advantages of small college instruction played themselves out in the lives of women graduates can be traced in individual biographies, journals, diaries and letters, even if they cannot be quantified. And while frustrations occurred at the disparities between an expensive education and the career chances to which it led, satisfactions also existed, not the least of which were the opportunities for making friends and the raising of self-esteem, even under the sharpest kinds of competitive striving and the sorts of disappointments registered in the women’s university novel, which in this respect resembles the Swedish genre described by Marta Ronne at these meetings.¹⁹

Is their historical role now over? The paradoxical legacy of the women’s colleges, now nearly gone in Britain but still available in the United States, divides onlookers. Those who favor coeducation as the rule believe that separation intensifies gender identification

and increases pressure for studies that are especially “suitable” for women. Perhaps the first, but the second, as the history shows, is not a foregone conclusion. Those who support the separation of the sexes in education accept the distinction between men’s and women’s natures, personalities and needs and welcome the freedom that single-sex institutions provide for self-exploration within defined and changing communities.

None of these views are separable into left-right political distinctions. They fit all ideological outlooks. Such blurring has typified the fascinating history of women’s colleges. The story is complicated.

¹ Burton R. Clark, *The Distinctive College* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1992).

² meaning also examinations, exercises and competitions. The word carries multiple meanings. It also refers to the process of inculcating skills and proficiencies that together determine character, as in the epistemologies of faculty psychology, prevalent on both sides of the Atlantic in the nineteenth century.

³ Sheldon Rothblatt, *The Modern University and Its Discontents* (Cambridge, 1997), chapter 2.

⁴ Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, “The Design of Women’s Higher Education,” in *The Wise Woman Buildeth Her House* (Groningen, 1992), 21.

⁵ Mabel Newcomer, *A Century of Higher Education for American Women* (New York, 1959), 12.

⁶ Rothblatt, chapter 3.

⁷ Newcomer, 12, 19.

⁸ State universities appeared as early as the 1780s, with the University of North Carolina as the first. The Land Grant or Morrill Act of 1862 (named after its congressional sponsor) was a transfer of federally-owned land to states upon condition that they use the land or the proceeds of its sale to establish universities. The Act further specified an “A & M curriculum, i.e., agriculture and the mechanical arts (engineering). However, liberal arts subjects were not in the least excluded. A second Act in 1890 specified a certain fairness in the distribution of federal funds to white and black groups. Whereas the first Act seems to have been followed according to its original intentions, the second Act has had a stormier history.

⁹ Lindy Moore, , *Bajanellas and Semilinas, Aberdeen University and the Education of Women, 1860-1920* (Aberdeen, 1991)10.

¹⁰ Linda M. Perkins, “The Education of Black Women in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Women and Higher Education in American History*, 65, 76, 80; and in the same volume, Jeanne Noble, “The Higher Education of Black Women in the Twentieth Century, 89, 92.

¹¹ Boas, 236.

¹² Newcomer, 78, 81-83, 91.

¹³ A word that had taken on special meaning in a society with a continuously expanding continental frontier invading territories belonging to existing Indian tribes.

¹⁴ Maresi Nerad, “Coping with Women Students – Women Coping with the University: The Origins of the University of California’s Department of Home Economics, 1905-1915,” in *History of Education Society Occasional Publication No. 8* (1987), 21-36.

¹⁵ Mabel Louise Robinson, *The Curriculum of the Woman’s College* (Department of the Interior, Bureau of Education, Bulletin No. 6, 1918), 108.

¹⁶ The elite women’s colleges, eager to establish women’s claim to intellectual and cultural parity, avoided or downplayed home economics or domestic science. But the subject was taken up in state universities, proof according to some historians that public coeducational universities were as gender conscious as private men’s

colleges, separating women from men according to departments, sometimes seating in lectures and other distinction-granting measures. Yet domestic economy was also an umbrella subject for developing a serious curriculum for men and women alike with respect to a full range of scientific and social scientific inquiries, leading to larger social concerns such as nutrition, pure food laws, legal issues respecting women's rights, labor market economics or household management at professional levels. The period was after all the "Progressive Era." Pioneering academics at Berkeley so regarded the subject, considering it as an alternative career to teaching, but their efforts, according to one recent account, were thwarted by administrative decisions that severed the connections between domestic science and the rest of the liberal arts curriculum. See Nerad, *ibid.*

¹⁷ See Sheldon Rothblatt, "The Limbs of Osiris," in *The University in Europe and America since 1800*, ed. Sheldon Rothblatt and Björn Wittrock (Cambridge, 1993), chapter 1.

¹⁸ Rita McWilliams-Tullberg, *Women at Cambridge, A Men's University – Though of a Mixed Type* (London, 1975), 15-16. A newer edition has been published by the Cambridge University Press.

¹⁹ Marta Ronne, "Intellectual Outsiders: Women's University Novels Published 1900-1943 and Their Historical Background [Sweden]."