

## ***The Admission of Women to the National University of Ireland***

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### ***Introduction***

The establishment of the National University of Ireland (NUI) in 1908 brought to an end a protracted dispute over the 'Irish university question' which had dominated the Irish political agenda at least since the 1850s. The central issue throughout this entire period was the provision of acceptable university education for lay Catholics, who argued that their entitlement to a university of their own was not being met. Although numerous settlements were attempted over the course of the century, none proved acceptable to the Catholic hierarchy, who continued to lobby for a state-funded Catholic university. However, British policy on university education since 1845 had attempted to adhere to the principle that the state should not endow denominational teaching for the laity.<sup>1</sup> The eventual establishment of two new universities under the Irish Universities Act of 1908, the National University of Ireland and Queen's University Belfast, provided a permanent solution which reflected and in many ways reinforced existing political and religious divisions.<sup>2</sup> Although both universities were theoretically non-denominational, the NUI was intended as a university for Catholics, while Queen's University Belfast catered largely to a Presbyterian community. However, despite the highly charged nature of the Irish university question, the issue of women's place within any university settlement received scant attention. The issue of providing for a more egalitarian model of university education was narrowly understood in terms of denominational equity. 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'.<sup>3</sup>

### ***The Irish University Question***

The university question, hijacked by denominational, political and economic agendas, became one of the most complex and controversial issues of modern Irish history. Its record was contested, reflecting a series of short-term fixes aimed at staving off the difficulty of legislating for a final solution, which was not forthcoming until 1908. The period 1850–1908 witnessed several educational experiments, aimed at placating Catholics and to a lesser extent Presbyterians, who expressed dissatisfaction with the provision of university education offered by the state.

In 1850, the University of Dublin, with its sole constituent college Trinity College Dublin, was the only university providing higher education in Ireland, that is, higher education for males. Prior to 1793, it was, like Oxford and Cambridge, only open to Anglicans and was identified with English rule and the governing class in Ireland.<sup>4</sup> Towards the end of the eighteenth century, following a period of penal legislation, changes were introduced to allow members of denominations other than the Established Church to enter Trinity College, and a minority of Catholics availed of this opportunity.<sup>5</sup> This concession did not apply to women, however, and Trinity College refused to admit women to degrees until 1904. Trinity College was anathema to the Catholic hierarchy who, indignant at the lack of university provision for Catholics, lobbied throughout the century for a state-funded Catholic university. As O'Donoghue notes, 'by the second half of the nineteenth century the Catholic Church had become a powerful interest group pressing its claims in educational matters with great tenacity.'<sup>6</sup> However, despite the majority position of Catholics and the powerful position of the hierarchy, state support for a Catholic university was not forthcoming and a number of other initiatives aimed at appeasing Catholic interests were instead tested.

The most controversial of these was the establishment of the non-denominational, state-funded Queen's Colleges in 1845.<sup>7</sup> Based in Galway, Cork and Belfast, it was intended that these colleges would provide higher education to the expanding Catholic middle classes. However, their non-denominational status provoked a ban on attendance from the Catholic hierarchy and numbers attending, particularly in Cork and Galway, predominantly Catholic areas of the country, were very low. Although women were granted admission to the Queen's Colleges from the 1880s, few availed of this opportunity, choosing instead to attend denominational women's colleges.<sup>8</sup> Their

admission was nonetheless significant since the Queen's Colleges would eventually be incorporated into the final university settlement.

As a countermeasure to the Queen's 'godless' Colleges, the Catholic hierarchy founded the Catholic University in 1854.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the vocational remit of the Queen's Colleges, the Catholic University, inspired by John Henry Newman, its first rector, promoted a more liberal agenda, fostering the development of moral and intellectual qualities rather than training for a particular profession.<sup>10</sup> However, despite its noble mission, the university was fraught with difficulties from the outset. It had no charter from the state to confer degrees and had to depend entirely on voluntary contributions. Its governance and administration were handed over to the Jesuits in October 1882, from which date it became known as University College. It would eventually form one of the three colleges of the federal National University of Ireland.

A temporary solution to the university question was provided in 1879 with the establishment of the non-denominational Royal University of Ireland (RUI).<sup>11</sup> Similar to London University, the RUI was a non-denominational examining body, but not a teaching university. However, it was provided with an annual grant for the allocation of fellowships, which were attached to the various colleges connected with the new university, the Catholic colleges becoming the main beneficiaries of the fellowship scheme. Catholics, not willing to go against the counsel of their hierarchy and attend either the Queen's Colleges or Trinity College Dublin, could now take out a degree at the RUI. Although women were admitted to the RUI from its inception, they were excluded from Fellows' lectures, from membership of the Senate and from Convocation. While critics of the new university viewed it as the very 'incarnation of the University Question', the RUI emerged at a critical time in the debate over university reform.<sup>12</sup> In particular, it provided an olive branch to the Catholic hierarchy who recognised its temporary value in the struggle to find a solution to a larger and more complex problem.

### ***Conservative Beginnings***

The position in 1908 with women sitting side by side with their male counterparts in the co-educational NUI was unimaginable when the higher education campaign took off in the late 1850s. At this early stage in the campaign, demands for educational reform were based on

conservative and socially acceptable arguments, namely that access to higher education would better equip women to carry out their role as wives and mothers. At this point, those advocating reform argued for the endowment of single-sex, denominational women's colleges in which women would receive an education comparable to their male counterparts. The pioneering women's colleges were the Ladies' Collegiate School (1859), later re-titled Victoria College Belfast and Alexandra College Dublin (1866). The former was established by Margaret Byers, Presbyterian educationalist and temperance activist, to provide girls with 'the same opportunity for sound scholarship that was given to their brothers in the best boys' schools'.<sup>13</sup> The school shared much in common with the ideology and ethos of new academic schools for middle-class girls emerging in England at the same time, which promoted the study of Latin and mathematics, in an effort to bring the education of girls in line with that of boys, and stressed the importance of participation in the public examination arena. Alexandra College Dublin was the result of an alliance between Richard Chenevix Trench, Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin, and Anne Jellicoe, prominent Quaker and educationalist. Its mission was 'to supply defects in the existing education of women; and to afford an education more sound and solid, more systematically imparted, and better tested, than [was] at present easily to be obtained by women of the middle and upper classes in this country'.<sup>14</sup> The Central Association of Irish Schoolmistresses, a key association, established in 1882 to represent the interests of women in any university settlement, emerged out of the nucleus of Alexandra College. This association worked closely on all issues relating to the higher education of Irish women with the Ulster Association of Schoolmistresses, founded by Byers and her close colleague Isabella Tod.<sup>15</sup>

While Protestant women had become a force to be reckoned with in any discussions over a university settlement, the absence of any organised presence of Catholic women at this point in the campaign was striking. While ardently lobbying for university access for Catholic males, the Catholic hierarchy's stance regarding university education for Catholic women was at best ambivalent. This was in part due to their opposition to the fundamental change in the direction of education for females which, they argued, threatened traditional roles. It was also, however, due to the fact that their focus was firmly on securing a settlement for lay Catholic males and they did not wish to detract from this fundamental aim. The hierarchy's lack of a policy relating to higher education for Catholic women was not sustainable in the long-term,

however, and when it became apparent that in the absence of a Catholic alternative, Catholic women were prepared to attend Protestant institutions, this triggered a response from a previously apathetic hierarchy. William Walsh, Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, was largely responsible for the Catholic hierarchy's stance on education at this time and a skilful and able negotiator.<sup>16</sup> Although not intrinsically committed to the provision of higher education for Catholic women, Walsh was a pragmatist and recognised that the hierarchy needed to respond to the changing needs and demands of Catholic women.<sup>17</sup>

From the 1880s, a network of Catholic women's colleges emerged in response to the growing demands of Catholic women for higher education in a Catholic setting. These colleges allowed Catholic women religious the opportunity to assume leadership roles both within the women's colleges and within the wider higher education movement. The role of these women was, however, more complex than that of their Protestant counterparts. Operating within a male-dominated hierarchical organisation, their actions were subject to considerable control and they had to negotiate their role capacity to influence reform. The Dominican, Loreto and Ursuline orders were the principal Catholic teaching orders to promote higher education for middle-class Catholic women. The most successful Catholic women's colleges were St Mary's University College (1893) operating under the auspices of the Dominican order and Loreto College, St Stephen's Green (1893). The former, founded with the express intention of rivalling the prestigious Church of Ireland Alexandra College, set out to provide Catholic women with 'an equal share in those educational advantages which [had] been the monopoly of other denominations'.<sup>18</sup> The latter was similarly set up with the direct aim of luring Catholic women away from Protestant institutions where it was argued attendance at lectures would 'take the bloom of faith off their souls'.<sup>19</sup> However, despite their opposing ethos, the women's colleges, whether Protestant or Catholic, had more in common than not. They 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 and to participation in the public examination arena.<sup>20</sup>

***Demands for full and unequivocal access to the university arena***

The late 1890s and early 1900s saw a heightening of the activity surrounding a settlement of the university question. A series of commissions was established to examine how best to address the issue of university reform. The Palles (1898), Robertson (1901) and Fry Commissions (1906) all occurred over an eight-year period and brought the salient issues around higher education reform further into the public arena and consciousness.<sup>21</sup> This was a critical time in the women's campaign as fundamental differences emerged regarding what leading figures considered the best outcome in any university settlement. While originally women had embraced the opportunity to engage in higher education in single-sex denominational women's colleges, these colleges came to symbolise their marginalisation from the benefits of university life enjoyed by men. The collective success of women students in the public examination arena and the highly publicised success of individual students 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, Tod and Jellicoe, their youth, energy and confidence generating a more radical agenda.

An important association to emerge at this point in the campaign was the Irish Association of Graduates and Women's Graduates. Established in 1902, its mission was 'to promote the interests of women under any scheme of University Education in Ireland, and to secure that all the advantages of such education shall be open to women equally with men'.<sup>22</sup> Alice Oldham, an Anglican and one of the first women graduates of the Royal University of Ireland was elected President of the new association. Mary Hayden, a Catholic, and a Fellow of the Royal University of Ireland, became its Vice-President. Although its central focus was university reform, it also became involved in the debate over teacher registration and worked to advance employment opportunities for women.<sup>23</sup> One of the key aims of the new association was to gain admission for women to Trinity College Dublin. This was a personal crusade for Oldham who viewed the refusal of Trinity to admit women as 'a great dereliction of duty, a deep stigma on Trinity College'.<sup>24</sup> While Trinity College had established special examinations for women students in 1870, many interpreted this gesture as reinforcing the view that women could not compete openly with men in university examinations. Oldham argued that examinations exclusively for women were 'more a detriment than a help in higher culture'.<sup>25</sup> Like

Emily Davies, founder of Girton College Cambridge (1869), she considered such examinations as being of no intrinsic value.<sup>26</sup>

While efforts to gain access for women to Trinity College Dublin had begun in earnest in the 1870s, they intensified in the 1890s. A petition signed by 10,000 Irish women fell on deaf ears in 1892, however a further petition in 1893 concerned the Board of the college to such a degree that it sought legal advice on the issue. To the Board's relief, it was informed that the admission of women would be contrary to the college's statutes and charter:

The Board are of the opinion that [the education of women] cannot be suitably conducted within the walls of an Institution intended for the residence of young men. Parents who place their sons in residence in Trinity College, Dublin, do so in the persuasion that their morals will be subject to some supervision... On the whole the Board consider that the introduction of female students into out classes would be attended with risks, which they are in no way called to incur and which they do not choose to run...<sup>27</sup>

However, in the intervening years the composition of the Board changed and the addition of a number of younger Fellows brought a more liberal and enlightened attitude towards the women's cause. Furthermore, after 1902, in light of the Robertson Commission on university education, the Board was conscious of the imminent restructuring of Irish higher education as well as of the growing support for the women's lobby. There was increasing pressure to recognise Alexandra College as a college of the University of Dublin, which the Board strongly resisted, as the recognition of a further college could pave the way for the establishment of a Catholic college within the university.<sup>28</sup> The reorganisation of the University of Dublin into a federation of colleges, to include Trinity College and a Catholic college had been muted in 1873 and would again emerge as an option in 1907. The 1873 plan had been foiled and its re-emergence in 1907 resulted in a 'Hands Off Trinity' campaign led by Provost Anthony Traill. The extent of the opposition to the idea of creating a new institution within the University of Dublin was such that Augustine Birrell, incoming Chief Secretary, gave assurances that any university settlement would not result in any alteration of the existing configuration of the University of Dublin.<sup>29</sup>

In 1904, women finally gained admission to Trinity College Dublin following decades of trenchant opposition. However, their integration into the college, like their admission, was slow, first securing access to

degrees in arts and medicine and later to more traditionally male fields like engineering. They were prohibited from residing in the college and were expected to leave the campus by six each evening. They accounted for about 15 per cent of the student cohort by 1914, coming predominantly from Protestant middle-class and professional families.<sup>30</sup>

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. Confident following the Trinity victory, the Irish Association of Women Graduates petitioned the authorities of University College to allow women access. They found a number of allies within the college itself, not least Francis Sheehy Skeffington, the college Registrar, who was active in the suffrage and nationalist movements.<sup>31</sup> In 1901 he had published 'A Forgotten Aspect of the University Question' in which he argued for a fully coeducational university with women being accorded complete equality.<sup>32</sup> He organised a further memorial to the authorities of University College, reiterating the views expressed by the Irish Association of Women Graduates. He secured support from colleagues both within and outside of the University, including that of Denis Coffey, future first President of University College Dublin.<sup>33</sup> Both the Irish Association of Women Graduates and Sheehy Skeffington's requests were rejected by the authorities of University College, however, on the basis that the accommodation of women students was neither practically nor financially viable. Writing to William Walsh, Catholic Archbishop of Dublin in 1908, William Delany, President of University College, made his position on co-education clear:

We are not at all satisfied here that it is in the interest of the educational formation of either the men or the women students that there should be such co-education... the working of a co-educational 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.<sup>34</sup>

However, events at a national level were to circumvent Delany's stance and he would soon have to contend with the incorporation of his sacred University College within a co-educational national university.

### ***Women and the Founding of the National University of Ireland***

Following numerous attempted settlements, a final solution to the university question was eventually reached under the Irish Universities Act of 1908.<sup>35</sup> Under the terms of the act, two new universities were created in Ireland, the National University of Ireland, with constituent colleges in Dublin, Cork and Galway, and Queen's University Belfast. Although both universities 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 Pařeta notes, 'covertly sectarian', the act ensured that Queen's University catered for Presbyterians, while the NUI catered primarily for Catholics.<sup>36</sup> Confident of their ability to 'catholicize' the new university, the Catholic hierarchy finally accepted the NUI as the best settlement they could reach.<sup>37</sup> The fact that the final solution to the university question necessitated the establishment of two separate universities, one in the north and one in the south of the country, each catering to the demands of a particular religious community, was indicative of the deep religious and political divisions within the country. As one Member of Parliament noted, the act was responsible for 'making the universities a dividing and not a unifying force and that was a deplorable result.'<sup>38</sup> The act was, however, the result of broad consultation and widely accepted as the only permanent solution to a deeply complex and contested question. As Bertram Windle, President of University College Cork, noted 'there is no doubt that, being the result of a compromise, [the Irish Universities Act] was, like most compromises, a disappointment to many people and a source of complete satisfaction to comparatively few.'<sup>39</sup>

As McCartney (1999) 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.<sup>40</sup> 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. Both St Mary's University College and Loreto College, St Stephen's Green, lobbied for recognition as 'recognised colleges', supported in their submission by William Walsh and by many in the Catholic community who expressed concerns over the 'mixing' of men and women in a co-educational university and over the education of nuns within such an environment. Although initially, it appeared that the NUI was genuinely considering the spirit of both applications and

indeed at one point granted Loreto College recognition, in the end both submissions were rejected ostensibly on legal grounds.<sup>41</sup> Thereafter, the women's colleges had to content themselves with tenuous links with a higher education framework to which they had once been so central, principally through the operation of university hostels and through the provision of intermediate (secondary) education.

In sharp contrast to the meagre concessions granted women by Trinity College Dublin in 1904, women were admitted to all degrees and offices of both the NUI and Queen's University Belfast in 1908. The Senate of the NUI was required to have at least one woman member nominated by the Crown, and this position was awarded to Mary Hayden. Hayden was, along with her close colleague Agnes O'Farrelly, also appointed to the Governing Body of University College Dublin and 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. At University College Cork, Mary Ryan was appointed Professor of Romance Languages 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).<sup>42</sup> At University College Galway, M.J. Donovan O' Sullivan was appointed Professor of History in 1914, while Emily Anderson was appointed Professor of German in 1917.<sup>43</sup> Despite the significance of the number of women appointed to senior academic posts, it must be remembered that their number, as a proportion of the entire university staff, was small. Furthermore, all senior appointments were in the Faculty of Arts, and this remained the trend for some time.

Women's position within the university framework was by 1908 indisputable. Moving from a position of relative obscurity in the 1870s when they were excluded from all of the universities, to one where by 1908, they had been admitted to all degrees and offices of the NUI, represented a major achievement. Their campaign had benefited from being part of the political 'university question' and they used the charged nature of this issue strategically to promote their cause. However, while welcomed as a victory in feminist circles, the admission of women to the NUI in 1908 brought with it a different set of problems. While in principle, women were entitled to the same rights and privileges as men within a co-educational structure, efforts intensified to limit and restrict their access and integration into significant areas of university activity. The opportunities for leadership and advancement enjoyed by women in the single-sex women's colleges were not

forthcoming under the new regime, and women students and academics had to fight for meaningful inclusion under the co-educational model.<sup>44</sup>

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